

# **Peter Kropotkin**

## **150th Anniversary**



**THE RAVEN**

**ANARCHIST  
QUARTERLY**

**20**



# **THE RAVEN anarchist quarterly** 20

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|                                                                                                        |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Editorial</b>                                                                                       | 309 |
| Herbert Read<br><b>Peter Kropotkin 1842-1921</b>                                                       | 311 |
| Nicolas Walter<br><b>Raven Review: Words of a Rebel</b>                                                | 323 |
| Colin Ward<br><b>Kropotkin's Federalism</b>                                                            | 327 |
| George Crowder<br><b>Freedom and Order in<br/>Nineteenth-Century Anarchism</b>                         | 342 |
| Laslo Sekelj<br><b>Bakunin's and Kropotkin's Theories<br/>of Revolution in Comparative Perspective</b> | 358 |
| Max Nettlau<br><b>Peter Kropotkin at Work</b>                                                          | 379 |
| Errico Malatesta<br><b>Anarchists have Forgotten their Principles</b>                                  | 389 |
| <b>Pro-Government Anarchists</b>                                                                       | 392 |
| <b>Peter Kropotkin - Recollections<br/>and criticisms of an old Friend</b>                             | 395 |

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## Editorial

We don't think that FREEDOM PRESS can be accused of ever spending much time digging up a long-forgotten-distant-past, or of commemorating centenaries of long-forgotten-propagandists-and-activists in the anarchist ranks.

The whole point of having a *Raven* on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Peter Kropotkin's birth is not to revive a long-forgotten-anarchist-and-his-work, but to *proclaim* to the world that more of Kropotkin's writings are available in 1992 than at any time in the last fifty years! Surely this means it is widely recognised that he still has an important contribution to make to the social and economic problems of our times.

FREEDOM PRESS could be excused, anyway, for making an exception in Kropotkin's case in view of the fact that he was after all one of the founders (in 1886) of our journal *Freedom*. And we must confess that for his centenary in 1942 FREEDOM PRESS published a 150-page volume of *Selections from his Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Herbert Read. It soon sold out and was never reprinted (it was wartime and even printing paper was severely rationed). In this commemorative *Raven* Herbert Read's largely biographical introduction is now reprinted for the first time fifty years later!

Apart from the Max Nettlau and Malatesta contributions, all in this issue are published for the first time. It was essential to publish Malatesta's *Recollections* (1931) and the two articles he wrote for *Freedom* in 1914-1916 (though this material is available in print\*) in order to present a balanced assessment of Kropotkin the man, and his contribution to the social struggle.

As we go to press a week-long International Scientific Conference is being held in Moscow (where Kropotkin was born) and in St Petersburg (where he went to school and later lived until his arrest in 1874) to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth. The conference is organised by the 'Kropotkin Commission of the Russian Academy of Science'. More than sixty papers had been promised. We hope to publish an exhaustive report of this Conference in *Freedom*. But above all, we hope that in the present political chaos in Russia some of Kropotkin's enthusiasm, and even his optimism, will filter down to the citizens in the streets.

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\*Malatesta - *Life and Ideas* (Freedom Press, 312 pages, £4.00)



### Publishers' Notes

This issue of *The Raven* completes the fifth volume of our journal and many subscriptions are due for renewal. Though the cover price for 1993 will be £3, ordinary subscriptions will remain *unchanged* in spite of increased postal charges. However, subscription rates to institutions *have* been increased to £16 inland, £20 overseas, and £25 overseas airmail.

The page numbers in *The Raven* number 19 'On Sociology' went from 1 to 100 (did you notice the four-page bonus?) instead of 209-308. We mention this not for most readers but for anybody indexing these issues. The current issue starts from page 309 and ends at page 404. Apologies to the indexers including our own HS, for the problems it creates.

*The Raven* was launched with a donation of £10,000 from our dear comrade Art Bartell (Attilio Bortolotti for some of us) in 1987. In spite of the fact that none of our writers is paid we lose £1,000 on every issue. So on 20 issues we are £20,000 down, less our comrade's £10,000 plus £1,400 from some of our readers, including the donations listed below. The balance of £8,600 has been paid out of Freedom Press literature sales, *but at the expense of, say, three new Freedom Press titles of 80 pages each of a 2,000 run edition.* Think on these things, and meanwhile our warm thanks to the generous supporters listed below.

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*Herbert Read***Peter Kropotkin 1842-1921**

Prince Peter Alexeivich Kropotkin was born at Moscow on the 9th December, 1842 (O.S.). His father, Prince Alexei Petrovich Kropotkin, is described by Kropotkin as 'a typical officer of the time of Nicholas I', but he seems to have been an easy-going parent, content to leave his son's education to his French tutor until it was time to send him off to a military academy. Kropotkin's mother was the youngest daughter of the commander of a Cossack army corps, General Sulima, and a woman of great refinement and sensibility, qualities which her son must have inherited, for she died before she had time to influence him directly. Kropotkin was then only three and a half years old, and the first half-distinct reminiscence of his life was to be of "a high spacious bedroom, the corner room of our house, with a wide bed upon which our mother is lying, our baby chairs and tables standing close by, and the neatly served tables covered with sweets and jellies in pretty glass jars – a room into which we children are ushered at a strange hour."

The Kropotkin family was of very ancient origin, and in the feudal period had been of great prominence in the principality of Smolensk. But latterly it had, like so many noble families in Russia, surrendered all of its powers and most of its possessions to the centralized autocracy of the Czars, and Prince Alexei might perhaps be best described as a well-to-do country gentleman. He owned nearly twelve hundred male serfs, situated in three different provinces. He kept fifty servants at Moscow, and half as many more in the country, four coachmen to attend to a dozen horses, three cooks for the masters and two more for the servants and a dozen men to wait at dinner. He ran a private 'scratch' orchestra of which he was unreasonably proud, and he entertained on an extravagant scale. He seems to have been a good landlord and a kind master. "Nothing, indeed, gave him more pleasure than to be asked for help ... for instance, to obtain free education for a boy, or to save somebody from a punishment inflicted



upon him by a law court. Although he was liable to fall into fits of rage, he was undoubtedly possessed of a natural instinct toward leniency, and when his patronage was requested he would write scores of letters in all possible directions, to all sorts of persons of his standing, in favour of his protégé."

Kropotkin's childhood was much the same kind of childhood as that enjoyed by two other aristocrats who were to become revolutionaries – Mikhail Bakunin and Leo Tolstoy. His autobiography reveals only one event which may have had deeper consequences than he cared to confess. Two years after his mother's death, his father married again – this time the daughter of an admiral – 'a young lady with a classical Greek profile, said to have been very beautiful'. The new Princess at once set about removing all traces of her predecessor: her portraits, her paintings, her embroideries, the furniture she had used and the servants who had known her. Kropotkin does not often mention his stepmother in his autobiography, and we may guess that a certain fidelity to the image of his real mother helped to determine his personality. He remarks of himself at the age of fifteen: "Human character is usually settled in a definite way at an earlier age than is generally supposed."

At this age he entered the Corps of Pages at St. Petersburg. This was an institution which combined the character of a military academy and a select school for the children of the nobility attached to the Court. There were only one hundred and fifty places, so the nomination was coveted, and young Peter was set upon a career which, in the eyes of his father, should naturally lead to his being appointed aide-de-camp to one of the Grand Dukes, or even to the Emperor himself. The education Kropotkin received was serious, and remarkably liberal. In addition to mathematics and purely military subjects, he had excellent teachers in classics and in Russian and German literature. Few of us are lucky to sit under such an inspiring teacher as Klasovsky seems to have been (see *An Inspiring Teacher*).

Kropotkin's intellectual development was rapid during the five years he spent at St. Petersburg, and when he passed out in 1862 he had a mind of his own on many subjects – natural science and Russian politics among them. The members of the Corps had the prescriptive right of choosing the regiment to which they should be attached, and Kropotkin, to the consternation of his teachers and comrades, not to mention his father, chose 'the mounted Cossacks of the Amur', a recently formed Siberian regiment. "The Amur region had recently been annexed by Russia; I had read" (he relates in explanation of his



strange choice) "all about the Mississippi of the East, the mountains it pierces, the sub-tropical vegetation of its tributary, the Usuri, and my thoughts went further – to the tropical regions which Humboldt had described, and to the great generalizations of Ritter, which I had delighted to read. Besides, I reasoned, there is in Siberia an immense field for the application of the great reforms which had been made or are coming: the masters must be few there, and I shall find a field of action to my tastes."

For some time Kropotkin was aide-de-camp to the governor of Transbaikalia at Chita, and was later appointed attaché for Cossack affairs to the governor-general of East Siberia at Irkutsk. Kropotkin describes the five years he spent in Siberia as a genuine education in life and human character. He became secretary of two committees – for the reform of the prisons and the whole system of exile, and for preparing a scheme of municipal self-government – and thus he "was brought into contact with men of all descriptions: the best and the worst; those who stood at the top of society and those who had vegetated at the very bottom – the tramps and the so-called incorrigible criminals." He worked with enthusiasm, reading all that there was to read about the historical development of these institutions in Russia and abroad. But his activity was by no means merely theoretical. "I discussed first the general outlines, and subsequently every point of detail, with practical men, well acquainted with the real needs and the local possibilities; for that purpose I met a considerable number of men both in town and in the province." This practical training in economic and political affairs should be emphasized: it was at the opposite pole to the purely academic education of Karl Marx, and if Marx had had some of Kropotkin's early experience he might not have placed so much of his faith in State administration.

In the summer of 1863 Kropotkin took charge of a geographical survey expedition to the Amur, the immense river which bounded the Asiatic territories recently annexed by Russia. It was proposed to establish a chain of self-supporting settlements along the whole length of the great river and its southern tributary, the Usuri – a stretch of some 2,500 miles – which would serve as a regular means of communication between Siberia and the Pacific Coast. The expedition completed and his report delivered to St. Petersburg, Kropotkin returned to Siberia and was then sent on another expedition, to explore an old Chinese trade route which cuts straight across northern Manchuria from Transbaikalia via Mergen to Blagoveschensk on the Amur. No European had ever visited the immense region and it was then totally



unknown, even to Chinese geographers. This dangerous journey accomplished, in the autumn of the same year Kropotkin made a still more interesting expedition up the Sungari to Kirin, in the heart of Manchuria. All those expeditions produced very valuable results, and gave Kropotkin such an enthusiasm for geographical exploration that in 1867 he left the army and returned to St. Petersburg, where he joined the staff of the university and became secretary to the physical geography section of the Russian Geographical Society. In 1873 he published a map and a paper in which he proved that the existing maps of Asia entirely misrepresented the physical formation of the continent, the main structural lines being in fact from south-west to north-east, and not from north to south, or east to west, as had been previously supposed. In 1871 he explored the glacial deposits of Finland and Sweden, and it was while engaged on this work that he was offered the secretaryship of the Russian Geographical Society. He was now in his thirtieth year, and the offer represented the realization of his scientific ambitions. But "other thoughts and longings" had gradually pervaded his mind, and faced with the necessity of coming to a decision which would determine the future course of his life, he made that historic renunciation, the account of which must be read in his own words (see *He Renounces his Scientific Career*).

Kropotkin renounced a scientific career, but he remained a scientist. Deeply as he was moved by his sympathy for the poor and oppressed, and however visionary his conception of the future, he realized that the truth in sociology as in geography or any other science could only be established by inductive methods. When, in writing the article on Anarchism for the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910), Kropotkin had to describe his part in the history of the movement, he did so in these words:

"As one of the Anarchist-Communist direction, the present writer for many years endeavoured to develop the following ideas: to show the intimate, logical connection which exists between the modern philosophy of natural sciences and Anarchism; to put Anarchism on a scientific basis by the study of the tendencies that are apparent now in society and may indicate its further evolution; and to work out the basis of Anarchist ethics."

Kropotkin succeeded in these aims, but he was not the type of man to be satisfied with a scholarly activity. His revolutionary activities between 1872, when he joined the International Workingmen's Association in Geneva, and 1886 when he was released from his second term of imprisonment, were of an extremely practical kind,



and to the end of his days he was a militant revolutionary, believing that a new form of society would only be achieved by the revolt of the oppressed classes. But as his analysis of the lessons of the French Revolution shows, he was fully aware of the dangers inherent in revolution, and anxious to prevent the repetition of reaction in the future revolution.

Kropotkin was soon disillusioned with the factiousness and timidity of the International Workingmen's Association. It was a critical year in the history of socialism – indeed, in the history of the world. This is not the place to review the events which led to the wrecking of the International by Marx at the Hague Congress in September, 1872, but from that moment it became evident, that all personal motives apart (and even his followers admit that these chiefly animated Marx) the socialist movement must henceforth take two diametrically opposed directions – one authoritative, collectivist, and dominated by a centralized party executive; the other libertarian, federative, devolving the widest possible autonomy to each nation, each region and each commune – indeed, to each individual. This latter tendency was represented in the International Association by the Jura Federation, which now became the centre of opposition against the authority of the general council. Kropotkin identified himself with this opposition. He did not get into personal touch with Bakunin, who was then living at Locarno and very much the inspiration of the opposition to Marx. He absorbed Bakunin's ideas, particularly his criticism of state socialism; but it was in long discussions with the clear-sighted independent Jura watchmakers that he worked out his own position. He never failed to pay the tribute due to Bakunin's personality and to the heroic example of that "colossal figure". But Kropotkin's personality was a very different one, not lacking in heroism or moral integrity, but patient rather than impulsive, penetrating rather than imaginative, constructive rather than destructive. Bakunin's dictum: *Destruction is also creative*, cannot have meant much to him.

Now firm in his convictions, Kropotkin returned to Russia to spread the truth among his fellow revolutionaries. But in 1874 he was arrested and imprisoned. He made a dramatic escape in 1876 and found his way to England. He was never to return to Russia until after the Revolution had been accomplished forty years later. He did not stay long in England but went to Switzerland, where he joined the Jura Federation. Bakunin had just died (July 1, 1876) but the Federation was now the mainspring of the revolutionary movement in the Latin countries, and its activities were intense. The next year Kropotkin



went to Paris to organize the movement there, returning to Switzerland in 1878 to edit the Federation's newspaper, *Le Révolté*. The assassination of the Czar, Alexander II, in 1881 led to counter-revolutionary measures in Switzerland, and Kropotkin was expelled from the country. He settled in London for about a year and began his researches on the history of the French Revolution. It was a year of real exile: "For one who held advanced socialist opinions, there was no atmosphere to breathe in ... Burns, Champion, Hardie and the other labour leaders were not yet heard of and the Fabians did not exist; Morris had not declared himself a socialist; and the trade unions, limited in London to a few privileged trades only, were hostile to socialism." Kropotkin and his wife, despairing of awakening a socialist movement in this country, went to Paris to take part in a more vigorous socialist movement, saying to themselves: "Better a French prison than this grave."

A French prison it proved to be. Kropotkin settled at Thonon, in Savoy, and continued to edit *Le Révolté*, and to write articles for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the *Newcastle Chronicle*. France was in a state of unrest, and the police were active. Kropotkin and his wife, along with other anarchists, were arrested at the end of 1882 and a grand public trial was staged at Lyons in January 1883, lasting about a fortnight. The charges were ridiculous, the self-defence of the arrested brilliant, and the main effect of the trial was to spread the doctrines of anarchism all over Europe. Nevertheless, Kropotkin, his wife and their comrades were condemned and thrown into prison. There they remained until 1885 or 1886, when the demand for their release became a major political issue. Kropotkin was set free in January, 1886 and went to Paris to stay with Elie Reclus – another scientist, this time an anthropologist, whose science had made him an anarchist. But Kropotkin was not allowed to stay in France: he came to England again and found a very different atmosphere. "The socialist movement was in full swing, and life in London was no more the dull, vegetating existence that it had been four years ago." He took a cottage in Harrow, made his own furniture, and began to cultivate his garden – intensively.

The remainder of Kropotkin's life was devoted to the elucidation and exposition of the principles of anarchism. Only a systematic bibliography could give an adequate idea of his immense literary activity during the next thirty years. It began with *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), and was uncompleted when, at the point of his death, he stopped in the middle of a sentence of his work on *Ethics*.



When the despotism of the Czars was finally overthrown in Russia, Kropotkin though then 75 years old, was one of the first of the exiles to return to help in the work of reconstruction. He settled at first in Petrograd, but he found the climate there too severe for him and went to Moscow. The conditions of living were no easier there, and he was compelled to retire to the remote village of Dmitrov, about 40 miles from Moscow, where he continued to work on his book on ethics. His life there and his last days have been movingly described by Emma Goldman in *My Disillusionment in Russia*, (London, C.W. Daniel & Co., 1925). She visited him twice in 1920, and hastened to his death bed, only to reach it one hour after his death on February 8th, 1921. Some quotations from her account will make a fitting conclusion to these notes on Kropotkin's life:

Two things had particularly impressed me on my two previous visits to Kropotkin: his lack of bitterness towards the Bolsheviki, and the fact that he never once alluded to his own hardships and privations. It was only now, while the family was preparing for the funeral, that I learned some details of his life under the Bolshevik régime. In the early part of 1918 Kropotkin had grouped around him some of the ablest specialists in political economy. His purpose was to make a careful study of the resources of Russia, to compile these in monographs and to turn them to practical account in the industrial reconstruction of the country. Kropotkin was editor-in-chief of the undertaking. One volume was prepared, but never published. The Federalist League, as this scientific group was known, was dissolved by the Government and all the material confiscated.

On two occasions the Kropotkin apartments in Moscow were requisitioned and the family forced to seek other quarters. It was after these experiences that the Kropotkins moved to Dmitrov, where old Peter became an involuntary exile. Kropotkin, in whose home in the past had gathered from every land all that was best in thought and ideas, was now forced to lead the life of a recluse. His only visitors were peasants and workers of the village and some members of the intelligentsia, whose wont it was to come to him with their troubles and misfortunes. He had always kept in touch with the world through numerous publications, but in Dmitrov he had no access to these sources. His only channels of information were the two government papers, *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. He was also greatly handicapped in his work on the new Ethics while he lived in the village. He was mentally starved, which to him was a greater torture than physical malnutrition. It is true that he was given a better *payok* than the average person, but even that was insufficient to sustain his waning strength. Fortunately he occasionally received from various



sources assistance in the form of provisions. His comrades from abroad, as well as Anarchists of the Ukraina, often sent him food packages. Once he received some gifts from Makhno, at that time heralded by the Bolsheviks as the terror of counter-revolution in Southern Russia. Especially did the Kropotkins feel the lack of light. When I visited them in 1920 they were considering themselves fortunate to be able to have even one room lit. Most of the time Kropotkin worked by the flicker of a tiny oil lamp that nearly drove him blind. During the short hours of the day he would transcribe his notes on a typewriter, slowly and painfully pounding out every letter.

However, it was not his own discomfort which sapped his strength. It was the thought of the Revolution that had failed, the hardships of Russia, the persecutions, the endless *ratzrels*, which made the last two years of his life a deep tragedy. On two occasions he attempted to bring the rulers of Russia to their senses: once in protest against the suppression of all non-Communist publications; the other time against the barbaric practice of taking hostages... But the protests had no effect. Thereafter Kropotkin felt that it was useless to appeal to a government gone mad with power.

During the two days I spent in the Kropotkin household I learned more of his personal life than during all the years that I had known him. Even his closest friends were not aware that Peter Kropotkin was an artist and a musician of much talent. Among his efforts I discovered a collection of drawings of great merit. He loved music passionately and was himself a musician of unusual ability. Much of his leisure was spent at the piano.

And now he lay on his couch, in the little workroom, as if peacefully asleep, his face as kindly in death as it had been in life. Thousand of people made pilgrimages to the Kropotkin cottage to pay homage to this great son of Russia. When his remains were carried to the station to be taken to Moscow, the whole population of the village attended the impressive funeral procession to express their last affectionate greeting to the man who had lived among them as their friend...

The funeral was a most impressive sight. It was a unique demonstration never witnessed in any other country. Long lines of members of Anarchist organizations, labour unions, scientific and literary societies and student bodies marched for over two hours from the Labour Temple to the burial place, seven versts (*nearly five miles*) distant. The procession was headed by students and children carrying wreaths presented by various organizations. Anarchist banners of black and scarlet Socialist emblems floated above the multitude. The mile-long procession entirely dispensed with the services of the official guardians of the peace. Perfect order was kept by the multitude itself spontaneously forming in several rows, while students and workers organized a live chain on both sides of the marchers. Passing the Tolstoy



Museum the cortège paused, and the banners were lowered in honour of the memory of another great son of Russia. A group of Tolstoyans on the steps of the Museum rendered Chopin's *Funeral March* as an expression of their love and reverence for Kropotkin.

The brilliant winter sun was sinking behind the horizon when the remains of Kropotkin were lowered into the grave, after speakers of many political tendencies had paid the last tribute to their great teacher and comrade.

### An Inspiring Teacher

Professor Klasovsky's first lesson was a revelation to us. He was a small man, about fifty years of age, very rapid in his movements, with bright, intelligent eyes, a slightly sarcastic expression, and the high forehead of a poet. When he came in for his first lesson, he said in a low voice that, suffering from a protracted illness, he could not speak loud enough, and asked us, therefore, to sit closer to him. He placed his chair near the first row of tables, and we clustered round him like a swarm of bees.

He was to teach us Russian grammar; but, instead of the dull grammar lesson, we heard something quite different from what we expected. It was grammar: but here came in a comparison of an old Russian folklore expression with a line of Homer or from the Sanskrit Mahabharata, the beauty of which was rendered in Russian words; there, a verse from Schiller was introduced, and was followed by a sarcastic remark about some modern society prejudice; then solid grammar again, and then some wide poetical or philosophical generalization.

Of course, there was much in it that we did not understand, or of which we missed the deeper sense. But do not the bewitching powers of all studies lie in that they continually open up to us new and unsuspected horizons, not yet understood, which entice us to proceed farther and farther in the penetration of what appears at first sight only in vague outline? Some with their hands placed on one another's shoulders, some leaning across the tables of the first row, others standing close behind Klasovsky, we all hung on his lips. As toward the end of the hour his voice fell, the more breathlessly we listened. The inspector opened the door of the classroom to see how we behaved with our new teacher; but on seeing that motionless swarm he retired on tiptoe. Even Dauroff, a restless spirit, stared at Klasovsky as if to say, 'That is the sort of man you are?' Even von Kleinau, a



hopelessly obtuse Circassian with a German name, sat motionless. In most of the others something good and elevated simmered at the bottom of their hearts, as if a vision of an unsuspected world was opening before them. Upon me Klasovsky had an immense influence, which only grew with years. Winkler's prophecy, that, after all, I might like the school, was fulfilled.

In western Europe, and probably in America, this type of teacher seems not to be widely spread; but in Russia there is not a man or woman of mark, in literature or in political life, who does not owe the first impulse toward a higher development to his or her teacher of literature. Every school in the world ought to have such a teacher. Each teacher in a school has his own subject, and there is no link between the different subjects. Only the teacher of literature, guided by the general outlines of the programme, but left free to treat it as he likes, can bind together the separate historical and humanitarian sciences, unify them by a broad philosophical and humane conception, and awaken higher ideas and inspirations in the brains and hearts of young people. In Russia, that necessary task falls quite naturally upon the teacher of Russian literature. As he speaks of the development of the language, of the contents of the early epic poetry, of popular songs and music, and, later on, of modern fiction, of the scientific, political, and philosophical literature of his own country, and the divers aesthetical, political, and philosophical currents it has reflected, he is bound to introduce that generalized conception of the development of the human mind which lies beyond the scope of each of the subjects that are taught separately.

The same thing ought to be done for the natural sciences as well. It is not enough to teach physics and chemistry, astronomy and meteorology, zoology and botany. The philosophy of all the natural sciences – a general view of nature as a whole, something on the lines of the first volume of Humboldt's *Cosmos* – must be conveyed to the pupils and the students, whatsoever may be the extension given to the study of the natural sciences in the school.

From Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*



### He Renounces his Scientific Career

Instead of joining an Arctic expedition I was sent out by the Geographical Society on a modest tour of Finland and Sweden, to explore the glacial deposits; and that journey drifted me in a quite different direction.

The Russian Academy of Sciences sent out this summer two of its members – the old geologist General Helmersen and Friedrich Schmidt, the indefatigable explorer of Siberia – to study the structure of those long ridges of drift which are known as *asar* in Sweden and Finland, and as *esker*, *kames*, and so on, in the British Isles. The Geographical Society sent me to Finland for the same purpose. We visited, all three, the beautiful ridge of Pungaharju and then separated. I worked hard during this summer. I travelled a great deal in Finland, and crossed over to Sweden, where I spend many happy hours in the company of A. Nordenskjöld. Already then (in 1871) he mentioned to me his schemes of reaching the mouths of the Siberian rivers, and even the Behring Strait, by the northern route. Returning to Finland I continued my researches till late in the autumn, and collected a mass of most interesting observations relative to the glaciation of the country. But I also thought a great deal during this journey about social matters, and these thoughts had a decisive influence upon my subsequent development.

All sorts of valuable materials relative to the geography of Russia passed through my hands in the Geographical Society, and the idea gradually came to me of writing an exhaustive physical geography of that immense part of the world. My intention was to give a thorough geographical description of the country, basing it upon the main lines of the surface structure which I began to disentangle for European Russia; and to sketch in that description the different forms of economic life which ought to prevail in different physical regions. Take, for instance, the wide prairies of Southern Russia, so often visited by droughts and failures of crops. These droughts and failures must not be treated as accidental calamities: they are as much a natural feature of that region as its position on a southern slope, its fertility, and the rest; and the whole of the economic life of the southern prairies ought to be organized in prevision of the unavoidable recurrence of periodical droughts. Each region of the Russian Empire ought to be treated in the same scientific way, as Karl Ritter treated parts of Asia in his beautiful monographs.

But such a work would have required plenty of time and full



freedom for the writer, and I often thought how helpful to this end it would be were I to occupy some day the position of secretary to the Geographical Society. Now, in the autumn of 1871, as I was working in Finland, slowly moving on foot toward the sea coast along the newly built railway, and closely watching the spot where the first unmistakable traces of the former extension of the post-glacial sea would appear, I received a telegram from the Geographical Society: 'The council begs you to accept the position of secretary to the Society.' At the same time the outgoing secretary strongly urged me to accept the proposal.

My hopes were realized. But in the meantime other thoughts and other longings had pervaded my mind. I seriously thought over the reply, and wired, 'Most cordial thanks, but cannot accept.'

It often happens that men pull in a certain political, social, or familiar harness simply because they never have time to ask themselves whether the position they stand in and the work they accomplish are right; whether their occupations really suit their inner desires and capacities, and give them the satisfaction which everyone has the right to expect from his work. Active men are especially liable to find themselves in such a position. Every day brings with it a fresh batch of work, and a man throws himself into his bed late at night without having completed what he expected to have done; then in the morning he hurries to the unfinished task of the previous day. Life goes, and there is no time left to think, no time to consider the direction that one's life is taking. So it was with me.

From Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*



## Raven Review

Nicolas Walter

### Words of a Rebel

by Peter Kropotkin, translated by George Woodcock

235 pages, Black Rose Books

(distributed by Freedom Press), £20.95

Kropotkin has always been easily available in English. His articles and pamphlets have appeared and reappeared since 1882; his books were published on both sides of the Atlantic from 1887 to 1924, and have been reprinted ever since, especially during the revival of interest in anarchism since the 1960s. Most of his important writings are accessible in several versions, but there has never been a proper uniform edition. The 'Collected Works of Peter Kropotkin' is an ambitious series produced in Canada which attempts for the first time to change this situation by bringing together all his major books and pamphlets. The first six volumes have been rather imperfect reprints of earlier English-language editions of Kropotkin's books with rather imperfect new introductions by George Woodcock – *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1989), *The Great French Revolution* (1989), *Mutual Aid* (1989), *The Conquest of Bread* (1990), *Russian Literature* (1991), *In Russian and French Prisons* (1991) – together with the biography by George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumović, *From Prince to Rebel* (1990). They have all been distributed in Britain by the Freedom Press and individually reviewed in *Freedom*. Future volumes will include *Ethics and Fields*, *Factories and Workshops*, as well as collections of shorter writings.

The latest volume is rather different – it is not a reprint but a new English translation of *Paroles d'un Révolté* (Words of a Rebel), translated as well as introduced by George Woodcock. Indeed this is the first time that this book has appeared in English, so it deserves a



warm welcome, even if this has to be qualified for various reasons. *Words of a Rebel* had an important place in Kropotkin's career. When he escaped from Russia and settled in Western Europe, in 1876, he earned his living by contributing to scientific periodicals and expressed his politics by contributing to anarchist periodicals. While he was living in Switzerland, at the beginning of 1879, he helped to begin a new periodical, *Le Révolté* (The Rebel), which became the main French-language paper in the anarchist movement. While he was imprisoned in France, from the end of 1882 to the beginning of 1886, a collection of some of his editorial articles appeared as his first political book. This was edited by his friend Elisée Reclus and published as *Paroles d'un Révolté* in Paris in 1885.

The book contained nineteen chapters, which were more or less extensively revised versions of articles published in *Le Révolté* during its first four years. They included several of Kropotkin's best-known short writings, which had already been and continued to be reprinted as pamphlets, such as *War*, *The Paris Commune*, *Law and Authority*, *Representative Government*, *Revolutionary Government*, *The Spirit of Revolt*, and above all *To the Young*, which was by far the most widely read thing he ever wrote. Like the pamphlets, the book was very successful, and it was reprinted and also translated into many languages (five are mentioned here, but there were at least thirteen). English translations of several chapters appeared as articles or pamphlets on both sides of the Atlantic, and a complete translation was serialised in an American paper as early as 1886-1887. But for various reasons no book version appeared in English, though some were planned at various times from the 1880s to the 1980s. George Woodcock has therefore rendered a considerable service by producing this edition, at the advanced age of 80. It is true that most of the significant material in it has been published in English several times in several forms, but it is obviously better to have it all together in one volume.

However, the result is marred by four problems. The first one is that the book is available only as a rather expensive hardback. If it sells well, it will presumably appear as a cheaper paperback, but otherwise another edition may have to be produced by another publisher. A second problem is that it is rather badly printed, with a large number of careless misprints which should have been or should be corrected. Names and dates suffer particularly badly, but the most unfortunate error is a reference to 'the propaganda of the dead'!

A third problem is that it has been rather badly translated, so that the style is not up to Woodcock's usual standard. It reads as though



it had been done by someone else, and the language is sometimes so crude as to become a sort of Frenglish. It is true that Kropotkin's own English was pretty clumsy, but his editors usually tidied it up for him, and it is a pity that the same service hasn't been done now.

A fourth problem is that it has been rather badly edited. For some reason *Words of a Rebel* is treated as a 'minor' or 'transitional' work, and described as Kropotkin's 'first book' and as 'the product of an anarchist agitator rather than a libertarian savant'. But it wasn't his first book – nor did it contain his 'earliest articles', as is also claimed. He had been writing since childhood, he contributed serious articles to the Russian press from the age of nineteen, and he also published two scientific books in his early thirties. The articles in *Words of a Rebel* were produced by a mature thinker and speaker and writer in his late thirties, after several years of intense political activity, and the ideas expressed in them were central to his system right up to the end of his life.

The discussion of the background to the book relies almost entirely on Kropotkin's own memoirs and a few other personal memories, and doesn't take account of any of the research in the primary sources – from James Guillaume and Max Nettlau to Martin Miller and Caroline – Cahm so much relevant material is missed and several points are blunted. The discussion of the book itself emphasises the split in the first International, though this was completed by the time Kropotkin joined the anarchist movement, and the shift in the anarchist movement from collectivism to communism, though this is hardly discussed in the book. There is only token recognition of the fact that Kropotkin wrote the articles as elementary propaganda for a popular audience, and no recognition of the fact that he saw them as an essential critical preparation for the more constructive programme later carried out in the articles written from 1886 to 1892 and collected in *The Conquest of Bread*. There is a critical remark that the focus of the book was narrowly French, though Kropotkin himself emphasised that the magazine was in French and intended for French readers. Thus the context and content of the book are both distorted.

There are also many careless factual mistakes. For some reason it is insisted that none of the chapters in the book were published before 1880, though a quick look shows that the first two date from March and April 1879. One trivial slip takes Kropotkin's description of the compositor of *Le Révolté* as 'a Little Russian' (a man from Little Russia, or Ukraine) to mean 'a little Russian' (a small man from Russia); he is then described as a 'White Russian', causing triple



ethnic confusion! More seriously, the chronology of the International and of the anarchist organisations and periodicals is muddled, resulting in a misleading account of the events of the 1870s and 1880s. For some reason anarchists are said to have practised propaganda by deed in the form of assassination only 'long after' the appearance of *Words of a Rebel*, though they had already begun doing so in the wave of violence which led to Kropotkin's arrest and imprisonment before its appearance. It is claimed that 'all of Kropotkin's books that have appeared in English up to the present were in fact originally published by commercial houses', though this immediately follows a reference to the Freedom Press edition of *Modern Science and Anarchism* (1912) and ignores several other non-commercial editions including two further Freedom Press titles – *Kropotkin: Selections from His Writings* (1942) and *Act for Yourself* (1988). It is suggested that Saint-Simon invented the slogan, 'From each according to his means, to each according to his needs.' And so on.

There are other editorial defects. The seven pages of Notes at the back are useful but not useful enough, and are spoilt by further oddities. The Introduction contains a short quotation from the Afterword which Kropotkin wrote for the Russian edition of 1921, but the book should surely have included the complete text, as well as some of his other additions to later editions. Indeed, going back to the beginning, though the book is described as 'the first complete' translation of *Words of a Rebel*, it isn't actually quite complete; some short passages have been omitted from the original text, presumably by mistake, as well as a couple of long footnotes, presumably on purpose.

As a result this pioneering book really isn't satisfactory. The final verdict must be that it is good to have an English edition of *Words of a Rebel* at last, but it is a pity not to have a better one.



*Colin Ward*

## **Kropotkin's Federalism**

University of Durham, Department of Russian and Centre for European Studies

Lecture series on the 150th anniversary of the birth of Peter Kropotkin, 11 November 1992

It seems incredible to me, but it is almost fifty years since I became acquainted with Kropotkin's federalism. I was an 18-year-old conscript in Glasgow where open-air political oratory still flourished and where in the years of unemployment before the war, speakers and debaters had nourished their wits in the Mitchell Library, open every day including Sunday. Frank Leech, an ex-miner, was one of several anarchist orators on Glasgow Green, and was answering the objections from a Communist questioner who had claimed that anarchism envisaged an impossible degree of local autonomy that would make ordinary public services like the post office or the railways a chaotic muddle, and that every society, however revolutionary, needed a strong central authority.

Of course I have forgotten Frank's words, and I can't imitate his accent, which was an overlay of Glaswegian on that of an Irishman from Lancashire, but what he said in effect was,

"It is precisely because we anarchists believe in localism that we advocate federalism. The Bolsheviks stole the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' and then used it to ensure that the Soviets, or local councils or communes, were stripped of every power they had. Our comrade Kropotkin pointed out that the postal services and the railway services of every country in Europe of every political colour from capitalist Britain, Communist Russia to Fascist Italy, co-ordinate their activities with no central postal or railway authority at all." He talked as though Kropotkin was still around and he went on to explain that "If you will call at our bookshop in George Street, you can get for



tuppence a pamphlet by our comrade Camillo Berneri, who was murdered by the Communists in Barcelona in May 1937, about Kropotkin's federalism as one of the basic factors of his anarchist ideology."

I don't know about his questioner, but I *did* go to the anarchist bookshop in George Street, and I bought the pamphlet *Kropotkin: His Federalist Ideas* by Camillo Berneri, published in 1942 by Freedom Press, the anarchist publishing house founded by Kropotkin and Charlotte Wilson in 1886, which survives to this day, and which handles, as well as its own editions, all the works of Kropotkin available today in the English language.<sup>1</sup> Berneri's essay first appeared in Italian in 1922, the year after Kropotkin's death, and is in print today in Italian and French, at least.<sup>2</sup>

I mention the circumstances of my introduction to anarchist federalism because it is important to stress that within my own adult lifetime there was not the slightest scholarly or academic interest in Kropotkin. His memoirs, now seen as one of the great autobiographical works in the 19th century flowering of Russian literature, had then been out of print for decades in Britain and America,<sup>3</sup> and the two biographies in English were yet to be written.<sup>4</sup> None of his other books were available, except for the 1939 Pelican edition of *Mutual Aid*. A handful of Kropotkin's pamphlets were still stocked by Freedom Press, and their little 16-page booklet used the 8-point type in which Marie Louise Berneri's translation of her father's essay had been printed in their wartime journal *War Commentary* in May 1942. And this explains why I was able, on Frank Leech's recommendation, to buy it in an anarchist bookshop in Glasgow in 1943.

Camillo Berneri was right to stress that while Kropotkin's federalism "is not a systematic theory and cannot be very clearly differentiated from that of Proudhon or Bakunin" it is unique in that his autobiography "enables us to follow the different phases in the development of his federalist thought step by step". It is also unique in that it arises from his personal experience as an army officer and geographer in the vast expanses of the Central Asian provinces of the Russian Empire as a servant of the Romanov autocracy. The equivalent in British terms would be that of an aristocratic young officer of the British Raj in Imperial India becoming a propagandist for Mohandas Gandhi's vision of an India of autonomous, self-governing villages.

The first part of the *Memoirs* is a description of a privileged childhood, told with the same clarity and perception that we find in Aksakov, Herzen and Tolstoy. The second is a unique account of life



in the Corps of Pages, as absorbing for Kropotkin's educational reflections as it is for its glimpses of life at court in the early years of Alexander II in whom such hopes had been placed with the liberation of the serfs in 1861. A military career seemed inevitable, and with a choice of elite regiments open to members of the Corps, young Kropotkin opted to serve with the Amur Cossacks in Siberia.

This was thought to be an eccentric or bizarre decision. "Are you not afraid to go so far?" the Emperor asked him. "No, I want to work. There must be so much to do in Siberia to apply the great reforms that are going to be made." Then, Kropotkin continues, "he looked straight at me; he became pensive; at last he said, 'Well, go; one can be useful everywhere'; and his face took on such an expression of fatigue, such a character of complete surrender, that I thought at once, 'He is a used-up man; he is going to give it all up'."

Then his book opens up into a travel narrative, with sociological and political overtones, an account of Kropotkin's journeys in Siberia and in the far Eastern territories recently annexed for the empire by Bakunin's cousin Muraviev-Amurski. Few writers convey so well that sense of inhabiting not a country but an immense continent, and it was his work there which gained him his reputation as a geographer. His theory of the orography of the Asian land-mass – the structure of its mountain systems – is the basis of the modern physical geography of Asia, and Kropotkin hoped that his work would be of practical use in the development of the resources of the region.

What Kropotkin discovered in the Russian Empire was exactly the same lesson that was discovered a century later as a result of intervention by the rich governments in strategic overseas aid, by the World Bank, and by the commercial banks with their investment in the poor nations of the southern hemisphere. The good intentions of distant administrators were smothered by the bureaucracy, and the money was looted as it trickled down, and re-invested in the private accounts of the looters, back in Moscow and St. Petersburg. There is a precise parallel in the situation today in Africa and Latin America where villagers are enduring yet more privations dictated by governmental advisers on how to run a market economy, to repay the interest on capital borrowings whose benefits never filtered down to them.

At every stage in this journeys through Transbaikalia, Manchuria and Kamchatka, Kropotkin learned the same grim truths. Ancient traditions of self-help and mutual aid in adversity were being destroyed by central power. Camillo Berneri draws attention to his observation that:



The higher administration of Siberia was influenced by excellent intentions, and I can only repeat that, everything considered, it was far better, far more enlightened, and far more interested in the welfare of the people than the administration of any other province of Russia. But it was an administration – and that was enough to paralyse all its excellent intentions, enough to make it interfere with and kill all the beginnings of local life and progress. Whatever was started for the good of the country by local men was looked at with distrust, and was immediately paralysed by hosts of difficulties which came, not so much from the bad intentions of the administrators, but simply from the fact that these officials belonged to a pyramidal, centralized administration. The very fact of their belonging to a government which radiated from a distant capital caused them to look upon everything from the point of view of functionaries of the government, who think first of all about what their superiors will say, and how this or that will appear in the administrative machinery. The interests of the country are a secondary matter.<sup>5</sup>

Kropotkin's observations of the workings of the system, were, for him, a practical confirmation in the field, of the message he had absorbed from Gogol's *The Inspector-General* and from samizdat versions of his *Dead Souls*. Elsewhere, Kropotkin explained that "His works circulated immensely in manuscript copies. In my childhood we used to copy the second volume of *Dead Souls* – the whole book from beginning to end, as well as parts of the first volume."<sup>6</sup>

But parallel with his knowledge of the inefficiency of central administration, as Berneri notes, were his observations of the "free association of those engaged in common interests". Once again, this was a confirmation of his earlier reading. His cousin Varvara Dmitrievna Drutskaya had introduced him towards the end of 1858 to Alexander Herzen's publication *The Pole Star*, smuggled into the country, where, as Marc Slonim puts it, Herzen had defended the ancient popular communal institutions:

The Russian people were interested in social change because their lives were based on socialistic principles: the *mir*, or rural commune, and the *artels*, or co-operatives of artisans, were the two main socialistic foundations of the Russian land. In acknowledging the importance of the *mir* and the *artel* Herzen was following the Slavophiles, but with this essential difference: where the Slavophiles saw them as bulwarks of tradition, conservation, and stability, Herzen discovered an instinctive communism in them.<sup>7</sup>

And so did Kropotkin. For him, direct experience confirmed theory, and ancient communal institutions, together with his reading



of the free cities of the Middle Ages, as well as the 19th century growth of the Friendly Societies, the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Movement, provided the evidence for his most famous book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*.<sup>8</sup>

It was in Siberia that the exiled poet Mikhailov introduced Kropotkin to the work of the paradoxical French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The brutal suppression of an attempted escape by Polish exiles led Kropotkin and his brother Alexander to resign their commissions and to return to St. Petersburg. The fourth part of his autobiography describes his studies and geographical work there, his expedition to Finland and his first visit to Western Europe, making contact with the socialist and anarchist movements. Once again his discovery of his political position was accompanied by a scientific and a sociological discovery. He advanced what was then a completely heretical hypothesis that instead of floating icefields, there had been a glacial period in which much of the continent, from the British Isles to most of Russia had been covered by a layer of glaciers in motion – a hypothesis which is repeated in every textbook of geology and physical geography.

In 1872 he made his first visit to Western Europe. The destination of the Russian aristocracy was usually Paris, but especially in the light of the repression that followed the Paris Commune of 1871, an event of great significance for Kropotkin as for all other socialists, the destination for all Russians of any reforming tendency was Switzerland, where they could breathe free air at last. In this little country, the supreme body was the Commune, federating for common purposes in the Canton, with a purely administrative Federal Council with a rotating chair and a minimum of power and authority. For a century the Swiss cities were full of young Russians, living on bread, tea and talk. For Kropotkin, the earnest reader, it was the opportunity to catch up with the ideas of Proudhon and Bakunin and their followers.

Proudhon was a citizen of France, a unified, centralised nation state, with the result that he was obliged to flee to Belgium. In 1858 he claimed that the creation of the German Empire would bring only trouble to the Germans and to the rest of Europe, and in 1862 he pursued his argument into the politics of Italy. First there were factors like geology and climate which had shaped local customs and attitudes. "Italy," he claimed, "is federal by the constitution of her territory; by the diversity of her inhabitants; in the nature of her genius; in her mores; in her history... And by federation you will make her as many times free as you give her independent states." I don't have to defend



the hyperbole of Proudhon's language, but he had further objections to the agreement between Cavour and Napoleon III to enforce a federation on Italy, for he realised that the House of Savoy would settle for nothing less than a centralised monarchy. And beyond this, he profoundly distrusted the liberal anti-clericalism of Mazzini, not through any love of the Papacy, but because he recognised that Mazzini's slogan *For God and the People* could be exploited by any demagogue who could control the machinery of a centralised state. He was almost alone among political theorists to perceive this:

Liberal today under a liberal government, it will tomorrow become the formidable engine of a usurping despot. It is a perpetual temptation to the executive power and a threat to the people's liberties. No rights, individual or collective, can be sure of a future. Centralisation might, then, be called the disarming of a nation for the profit of its government...<sup>9</sup>

Everything we now know about the history of Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa this century supports this perception. Nor does the North American style of federalism, so lovingly conceived by Thomas Jefferson, dispel this threat. See the way that successive US presidents have manipulated the system. Proudhon's Canadian translator, Richard Vernon, paraphrases his conclusion thus:

Solicit men's view in the mass, and they will return stupid, fickle, and violent answers; solicit their views as members of definite groups with real solidarity and a distinctive character, and their answers will be responsible and wise. Expose them to the political "language" of mass democracy, which represents "the people" as unitary and undivided, and minorities as traitors, and they will give birth to tyranny. Expose them to the political language of federalism, in which the people figures as a diversified aggregate of real associations, and they will resist tyranny to the end.<sup>10</sup>

This observation reveals a profound understanding of the psychology of politics. Proudhon was extrapolating from the evolution of the Swiss Confederation, but Europe has other examples. The reputation of the Netherlands as a pragmatic tolerant country despite its own deep divisions is the result of the search for harmony among the mediaeval city states of Holland and Zeeland. Diversity, not unity, creates a tolerable society. This was one of the important perceptions that Kropotkin learned from Proudhon, who had listened in the 1860s to the talk of a European confederation or a United States of Europe. Proudhon remarked that "By this they seem to understand nothing but an alliance of all the states which presently exist in Europe, great



and small, presided over by a permanent congress. It is taken for granted that each state will retain the form of government that suits it best. Now since each state will have votes in the congress in proportion to its population and territory, the small states in this so-called confederation will soon be incorporated into the large ones...."

The second of Kropotkin's anarchist mentors claimed his attention, and ours for a variety of reasons. They never actually met, but Bakunin's influence was strong among the friends Kropotkin made in the Jura Federation of the First International, with its strongly autonomist and anti-centralist character.<sup>11</sup> Bakunin was almost alone among 19th century political thinkers in foreseeing the horrors of the clash of modern 20th century nation states in the first and second World Wars, as well as in predicting the destiny of centralising Marxism in the Russian Empire. In 1867 Prussia and France seemed to be poised for a war about which empire should control Luxembourg and this, through the network of interests and alliances, "threatened to engulf all Europe". A League for Peace and Freedom held its congress in Geneva, sponsored by prominent people from various countries, like Giuseppe Garibaldi, Victor Hugo and John Stuart Mill. Bakunin seized the opportunity to address this audience, and published his opinions under the title *Fédéralisme, Socialisme et Anti-Théologisme*. This document set out thirteen points on which, according to Bakunin, the Geneva Congress was unanimous.

The first of these proclaimed, "That in order to achieve the triumph of liberty, justice and peace in the international relations of Europe, and to render civil war impossible among the various peoples which make up the European family, only a single course lies open: to constitute *the United States of Europe*." His second point argued that this aim implied that states must be replaced by regions, for it observed "that the formation of these States of Europe can never come about between the States as constituted at present, in view of the monstrous disparity which exists between their various powers". His fourth point claimed "that not even if it called itself a republic could any centralised, bureaucratic and by the same token militarist State enter seriously and genuinely into an international federation. By virtue of its constitution, which will always be an explicit or implicit denial of domestic liberty, it would necessarily imply a declaration of permanent war and a threat to the existence of neighbouring countries." Consequently his fifth point demanded "That all the supporters of the League should therefore bend all their energies towards the reconstruction of their various countries, in order to



replace the old organisation founded throughout upon violence and the principle of authority by a new organisation based solely upon the interests, needs and inclinations of the populace, and owning no principle other than that of the free federation of individuals into communes, communes into provinces, provinces into nations, and the latter into the United States, first of Europe, then of the whole world."

The vision thus became bigger and bigger, but Bakunin was careful to include the acceptance of secession. His eighth point declared that "just because a region has formed part of a State, even by voluntary accession, it by no means follows that it incurs any obligation to remain tied to it for ever. No obligation in perpetuity is acceptable to human justice... The right of free union and equally free secession comes first and foremost among all political rights; without it, confederation would be nothing but centralisation in disguise."<sup>12</sup>

Bakunin refers admiringly to the Swiss Confederation, "practising federation so successfully today", as he put it, and Proudhon too, explicitly took as a model the Swiss supremacy of the *commune* as the unit of social organisation, linked by the *canton*, with a purely administrative *federal council*. But both remembered the events of 1848, when the *Sonderbund* of secessionist cantons were compelled by war to accept the new constitution of the majority. So Proudhon and Bakunin were agreed in condemning the subversion of federalism by the unitary principle. In other words there must be a right of secession.

Once again, direct experience reinforced the message Kropotkin had learned from his eager reading. He was urged to visit Sonvilier, in a valley of the Jura hills, where the watch-case makers in their home workshops had linked with the workers of the Neuchâtel area to form the Jura Federation. One of the watch-case makers, Adhémar Schwitzguébel, with whom Kropotkin was later closely associated, took him into this nest of precision industry, combined with food-production. It was the turning-point in his life, beautifully described in his autobiography, though for brevity, I will read you the account by one of his biographers, Martin Miller:

Kropotkin's meetings and talks with the workers on their jobs revealed the kind of spontaneous freedom without authority or direction from above that he had dreamed about. Isolated and self-sufficient, the Jura watchmakers impressed Kropotkin as an example that could transform society if such a community were allowed to develop on a large scale. There was no doubt in his mind that this community would work because it was not a matter of



imposing an artificial 'system' such as Muraviov had attempted in Siberia but of permitting the natural activity of the workers to function according to their own interests. He was further impressed in Sonvilier by the prevailing influence of Bakunin, whose name was invoked more as a moral influence than as an intellectual authority. All of these observations brought Kropotkin to the point of disrespecting all authority and uncritically worshipping the downtrodden masses. It is at this juncture that he dates his conversion: "I became an anarchist".<sup>13</sup>

Martin Miller cites the recollection of the Swiss anarchist James Guillaume, that in Neuchâtel he told him that he planned to learn a trade, become a worker and make propaganda for the International, and that realising the impractical nature of this plan,

I dissuaded him. I pointed out to him that it would be too difficult for the Swiss workers to accept a Russian prince as a true comrade; that his propaganda would be more effective if it were carried out in Russia among his compatriots. He knew their needs and could speak to them in the language most appropriate to their special conditions... He recognised that I was right and he said to me: "I will return to Russia".<sup>14</sup>

Kropotkin did return to Russia, was involved in underground agitation, was imprisoned like so many of his precursors in the Peter-Paul Fortress, made a dramatic escape to Britain, landing at Hull and moving on to Edinburgh. He resolved that, once he had obtained some kind of lasting work in geographical writing, he would return to Switzerland and join the Jura Federation of the International Workingmen's Association. This he did, while his wife Sofia earned a B.Sc. at the University of Geneva. But his defence of the assassins of Alexander II was too much, even for the Swiss Federal Council, and he was expelled from that country. After his imprisonment in France, an episode that led to his book *In Russian and French Prisons* and to several outstanding essays on crime and punishment<sup>15</sup>, Kropotkin settled in the London suburbs, first in Harrow, and then at Viola Cottage, Bromley, Kent, before moving to Brighton for the sake of his health. In his English years Kropotkin wrote continually for the anarchist press in English, French and Russian, for scientific journals and for *The Nineteenth Century*, in which several of his books were serialised. With the outbreak of the First World War, his support for the Allies alienated him from the anarchist movement. For the first time for over forty years the official Russian press was open to him and his call for Russians of every political view to join forces against German aggression.



"The old fool must have completely lost his mind," wrote Stalin to Lenin, and the opening pages of Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914* evoke the confusion that this political about-turn brought to ordinary obscure sympathisers inside Russia. With the February Revolution and the abdication of the Tsar, Peter and Sofia Kropotkin, at the ages of 74 and 60, began packing for their return. He presented his desk, which had formerly belonged to Richard Cobden, to the Brighton Trades and Labour Club, and you can sit at it today at the National Labour Museum in Manchester. Even when faced with the realities of revolutionary Russia, Kropotkin went on advocating the continuance of the war, and was as surprised as anyone else by the success of the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. He settled at Dmitrov, forty miles from Moscow, and gradually re-established contact with anarchists, both guerrilla activists like Makhno and returning exiles. They were shocked by the privations under which the Kropotkins were living, to which they replied that their situation was no worse than anyone else's.

The fragments from 1920, the last year of Kropotkin's life, like his two letters to Lenin, are full of interest in the light of the subsequent history of the Soviet Union. He died on 8 February, 1921. On 10 June, 1920, with the visit to Russia of the British Labour Delegation, he entrusted to Margaret Bondfield (later the first woman cabinet minister in Britain) his "Message to the Workers of the West", which he had dated April 28, 1919, and in the same year the Bolshevik government put a railway coach at the disposal of the English Labour politician George Lansbury, in his capacity as editor of the *Daily Herald*, to visit Kropotkin. Lansbury was a widely respected pacifist socialist who later became leader of the Labour Party. He brought with him an American journalist, Griffin Barry (who, just for the sake of historical continuity, I'll mention was my wife Harriet's father), and in the capacity of translators (although of course Kropotkin spoke English) two famous Russo-American anarchists, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, who had been deported from the United States on the orders of Attorney-General Palmer.

Kropotkin's "Message to the Workers of the West" was his final affirmation of the federal principle, and is of great interest in the light of the disintegration of the Soviet Union seventy years later:

The state of war has been an excuse for strengthening the dictatorial methods of the Party, as well as its tendency to centralise every detail of life in the hands of the Government; with the result that immense branches of the usual



activities of the nation have been brought to a standstill. The natural evils of State Communism are thus increased tenfold under the excuse that all the misfortunes of our life are due to the intervention of the foreigners... A renewal of relations between the European and American nations and Russia certainly must not mean the admission of a supremacy of the Russian nation over those nationalities of which the Empire of the Russian Tsars was composed. Imperial Russia is dead and will not return to life. The future of the various Provinces of which the Empire was composed lies in the direction of a great Federation. The natural territories of the different parts of that Federation are quite distinct for those of us who are acquainted with the history of Russia, its ethnography and its economic life; and all attempts to bring the constituent parts of the Russian Empire – Finland, the Baltic Provinces, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Siberia and so on – under one central rule are surely doomed to failure. The future of what was the Russian Empire is in the direction of a Federation of independent units.

Well, of course, seventy years on, we can see the relevance of this, but what we actually see is a muddy, and sometimes bloody, re-assertion of national sentiment, not only in the old Russian Empire, but in the European nations annexed by Stalin's empire. Kropotkin went on to say that "I see the coming in the near future of a time when every portion of that Federation will itself be a federation of free rural communes and free cities; and I still believe that portions of Western Europe will soon take the lead in that direction."<sup>16</sup>

Here, with his incorrigible optimism, he was foreshadowing that faction in European politics who argue for a Europe of the Regions and mean by the word 'Subsidiarity', not the interpretation that it means final decisions by national governments, but the definition adopted by the Council of Europe which sought in its *Charter for Local Self-Government*, "to formalise commitment to the principle that government functions should be carried out at the lowest level possible and only transferred to higher government by consent."<sup>17</sup>

Anarchists like me are not really comfortable in the climate of the current debate, partly because we deplore the exploitation of primitive national and religious separatism and partly because we note how the economic power of international finance-capitalism remains unchallenged. Proudhon, Kropotkin's precursor, had argued 130 years ago that a federal Europe was "impossible to realize among great powers with unitary constitutions", and a century later, the economist Leopold Kohr (Austrian by birth, British by nationality, Welsh by choice), who also describes himself as an anarchist, published his



book *The Breakdown of Nations*, glorifying the virtues of small-scale societies and arguing, once again, that Europe's problems arise from the existence of the nation state. Praising, like Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, the theoretical virtues of the Swiss Confederation, he claimed, with the use of maps, that "Europe's problem – as that of any federation – is one of division, not of union".<sup>18</sup> Perhaps we should be cheered by the news in July 1992 that following the decision by the Federal Council of the Helvetian Confederation to apply for membership of the European Community, one of its members, Andreas Gross, described as "a cycle-riding, non-suit-wearing socialist federal councillor who works for the Institute of Direct Democracy" has initiated a campaign for the Eurotopian Movement, dedicated, not to the Europeanisation of Switzerland, but to the Switzerisation of Europe.

Kropotkin, as an anarchist, had, of course, an even wider aim. He sought an even more direct democracy than Federal Councillor Gross. He saw both the state and municipal apparatus being superseded by voluntary associations and societies. "Every day," he wrote in 1887, "new societies are formed, while every year the old ones aggregate together into larger units, federate across the national frontiers, and cooperate in some common work." Drawing from direct observation from the days when he and Sofia lived in the village of Clarens in the hills above Lake Lemman, in "a small cottage overlooking the blue waters of the lake, with the pure snow of the Dent du Midi in the background," he observed that

The most striking feature of these numberless free growths is that they continually encroach on what was formerly the domain of the State or the Municipality. A householder in a Swiss village on the banks of Lake Lemman belongs now to, at least, a dozen different societies which supply him with what is considered elsewhere as a function of the municipal government. Free federation of independent communes for temporary or permanent purposes lies at the very bottom of Swiss life, and to these federations many a part of Switzerland is indebted for its roads and fountains, its rich vineyards, well-kept forests, and meadows which the foreigner admires. And besides these small societies, substituting themselves for the State within some limited sphere, do we not see other societies doing the same on a much wider scale?<sup>19</sup>

In Geneva in 1879, he had started, together with two working men, François Dumartheray and George Herzig, the journal *Le Révolté*, and there, in the issue for the 15th of May, 1880, he set out his vision of the federal society that would surge out of the ruins of the State:



For the burghers of the middle ages the Commune was an isolated state, clearly separated from others by its frontiers. For us, 'Commune' no longer means a territorial agglomeration; it is rather, a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals which knows neither frontiers nor walls. The social Commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined entity. Each group in the Commune will necessarily be drawn towards similar groups in other communes; they will come together and the links that federate them will be as solid as those that attach them to their fellow citizens, and in this way there will emerge a Commune of interests whose members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages. Each individual will find the full satisfaction of his needs only by grouping with other individuals who have the same tastes but inhabit a hundred other communes.

Today already free societies are beginning to open up an immense field of human activity. It is no longer merely to satisfy scientific, literary or artistic interests that humanity constitutes its societies. It is no longer merely to pursue the class struggle that men enter into leagues.

One would have difficulty nowadays finding one of the multiple and varied manifestations of human activity that is not already represented by freely constituted societies, and their number keeps growing unceasingly, each day invading new fields of action, even among those that were once considered the preserve of the State. Literature, the arts, sciences, museums, far off enterprises, polar expeditions, even territorial defence against aggressors, care for the wounded, and the very courts of law: everywhere we see personal initiative emerging and assuming the form of free societies. This is the tendency, the distinctive trait of the second half of the 19th century.<sup>20</sup>

Several things strike us about Kropotkin's affirmation from over a century ago. The first is his unjustified optimism. The social phenomena he observed were *not* the distinctive trait of the second half of the 19th century, and they are certainly *not* those of the second half of the 20th century. The collapse of the Russian Empire has not been replaced by the free associations he envisaged, and nor was the dissolution of the empires of the other imperialist governments, and nor was that of the artificially created Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The right-wing libertarians who have influenced British governments since 1979, in delivering state-owned monopoly public services into private hands, and aim to free us from the state in everything from parcel post to prisons, have very little in common with left-wing libertarians like Kropotkin.

Like the rest of progressive opinion in his day and ours, he overestimated the ease with which his fellow-humans could outgrow



tribal, ethnic and religious loyalties. But the passage I have just quoted reveals unique insights. Who else, in his day, anticipated the 'global village' in which you and I as members of the community of scholars automatically live, without even thinking about it? The same thing is true of the community of gardeners, advocates of wind-power electricity generation, or country-and-western music enthusiasts. Yet, just because they hadn't made Kropotkin's imaginative leap, there were solemn debates in the post-war decades between rival advocates in the world of sociology and town-planning about the relative merits of communities of *interest* and communities of *propinquity*. We all, automatically, belong to both.

Similarly, while every variety of socialists, from the Fabians to the Marxists, put their trust in the conquest of state power in order to introduce governmental socialism of the Soviet, the Scandinavian variety, or the kind envisaged by the post-war Labour government in Britain, all of them discredited in the popular mind by the end of our own century, Kropotkin was warning us that we will be compelled to find new forms of organisation for the social functions that the state fulfills through the bureaucracy, and "that as long as this is not done, nothing will be done".<sup>21</sup>

I don't think that, comparing his federalist hopes with actual historical evolution, we can afford to conclude that he was wrong.

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*George Crowder*

## **Freedom and Order in Nineteenth-Century Anarchism**

The claim that anarchism is a purely utopian doctrine, that the anarchist society exists and can exist 'nowhere', is often presented as a defence of social order. Vulgar misconception equates anarchism with 'anarchy', in ordinary usage the opposite of order; by extension 'anarchism' is assumed to be the advocacy of social disorder, the overthrow of all rules governing conduct. From Proudhon onwards anarchists have replied that anarchism, the social and political doctrine, implies the absence not of rule or principle but of a ruler.<sup>1</sup> What anarchists seek is the overthrow not of all social order, but only of that corrupt order imposed on people by government. But if it is simply false that anarchists seek disorder as a deliberate end, a more sophisticated objection alleges that disorder is in any case the logical outcome of ends it does seek. For anarchists are known to be committed to an extreme, indeed untrammelled, individual freedom. How is order possible when there is nothing to stop people doing exactly as they like? From the anarchist insistence that a society is conceivable in which the freedom they promote will be compatible with a more harmonious society than any hitherto experienced arises the charge of utopianism. The anarchist vision, encapsulated in Proudhon's dictum that liberty is "the mother of order" appears hopelessly remote and unrealistic, if not logically incoherent.<sup>2</sup> Yet anarchists have characteristically denied that their views are utopian, seeing themselves as proponents of a tough-minded, indeed in some cases rigorously 'scientific', social and political theory. How can they justify this self-image, especially in view of the apparent conflict between their soaring aspiration to freedom and the banal necessity for some system of social order?

The chief aim of this paper is to reconstruct in broad outline the answer to this question that is given or implied by what may be called



the classic nineteenth-century tradition of anarchism. I shall focus on the work of the tradition's leading exponents, namely Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. (For the sake of brevity, I shall refer to these writers as 'the anarchists', although I do not wish to imply that other thinkers have not belonged to wholly or partly different anarchist traditions.) My central claim is that the widespread prejudice against anarchism as ungrounded utopianism rests in large part on a misunderstanding of the conception of freedom the anarchists hold as an ideal. Once that conception is properly understood, their claimed reconciliation of freedom and order is more plausible than is often supposed given the basic assumptions they share with many of their contemporaries. On this ground they ought to be acquitted of utopianism. In addition I shall point to two particular respects in which the anarchist diverge from the characteristic tendencies of utopian thought, namely their vision of the desirable society as less than perfect, and their relatively plausible account of how that society is to be attained. Not wishing to raise hopes or fears unduly, however, I give advance warning that my thesis is not wholly favourable to the anarchists. Although their views on freedom and order have been rejected for the wrong reasons, my reinterpretation suggests that those views must be rejected in the end for a different set of reasons. By way of conclusion I shall briefly consider the implications of this analysis for contemporary anarchism. The interpretation offered here does not aim at comprehensiveness. Even some very prominent nineteenth-century anarchist themes, for example agrarian romanticism and revolutionary violence, will not be discussed. I do not intend by this omission to deny the rich, and in some places confused, nature of nineteenth-century anarchist thought; merely to single out a particular line of argument that is perhaps its most fundamental and coherent theoretical basis.

## I

Before beginning the argument proper, we can dispose immediately of a facile solution to the problem of stateless order that is often attributed to the anarchists but which is neither a fair statement of the position they take nor consistent with it. This is the assumption that social harmony will emerge automatically upon the abolition of the state, simply because human nature is naturally virtuous.<sup>3</sup> Once the corrupting influence of government is removed, so the anarchist



argument is supposed to run, man's fundamental moral integrity will reassert itself and promote harmonious social relations. In fact the anarchists' view cannot be subsumed under such a crude claim. Certainly they believe that the state is the main impediment to the realisation of man's moral potential and that its abolition is therefore an essential condition of that realisation, but none of them would claim that the defeat of the state of itself guarantees the attainment of the end they seek. That end would be attained only through further effort on the part of individuals to comprehend and follow the moral law for themselves. I shall return to this point later. The anarchists, moreover, *could* not hold the crude 'natural goodness' account of order because it is inconsistent with some of the most important components of their theory. They are obliged to concede that human nature is not wholly good, because only then could they account for the appearance of governments in the first place. It is because there is a native tendency in human beings to abuse power over others that the anarchists insist that no one is virtuous enough to be entrusted with political office. "Far from living in a world of visions and imagining men better than they are", writes Kropotkin, "we see them as they are; and that is why we affirm that the best of men is made essentially bad by the exercise of authority."<sup>4</sup>

A preliminary orientation of my argument may now be attempted in terms of the familiar distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty.<sup>5</sup> Many different versions of this distinction have been advanced; I shall use the following model, which is in line with the classic nineteenth-century formulation that descends from Hegel and, probably adopted from him, reappears in Bakunin.<sup>6</sup> All statements of the form 'X is free' can be understood to mean that there is no constraint on some activity willed by a subject X. The crux of the negative-positive distinction is the subject-variable X. Negative liberty is the freedom of the 'empirical' subject, the individual person as we find him or her, identified by all the desires and wishes he or she might have. Roughly speaking, I am negatively free if I am not prevented from doing whatever I might want to do. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is the freedom of the 'authentic' person; of the 'true' or 'real' self, or that part of the individual's personality with which he or she is most closely identified. I am free in the positive sense to the extent that my authentic self is not under some constraint. What exactly is to be taken as authentic to the personality is a question that has received many different answers, one of which I shall outline presently.



Several commentators have assumed that the nineteenth-century anarchists conceive of freedom in a purely 'negative' sense.<sup>7</sup> This assumption is natural enough since it accords with the popular conception of anarchism as freedom from all restraint. The idea of negative liberty – of not being prevented from doing whatever I might like to do – is commonly associated with the notion of a personal area of non-interference, asserted in particular against the state. It might seem reasonable to think of anarchism as a doctrine which urged the extreme extension of such spheres of personal independence.

However, while this sort of freedom does indeed matter to the anarchists, it is a mistake to suppose that their thought can be adequately explained in these terms alone. The trouble with the popular impression of the anarchist idea, and also with many scholarly accounts, is that they neglect the crucial moral dimension of the anarchist concept and of the doctrine in which it is found. The anarchists do not characterise the good society as one in which people merely act as they please, nor even, as Alan Ritter has suggested, as one in which people are directed by a demanding but purely open-ended rationality.<sup>8</sup> Rather they maintain that the good society is a moral order in which freedom implies virtue as part of its meaning. A careful examination of the texts reveals that the kind of freedom most valued by the anarchists, indeed valued above all else, is not a negative but a positive conception of freedom, the freedom of the true or authentic self. Rather than a licence to do as I like, indulging in whatever desires I might happen to have, the kind of liberty advocated by the anarchists is the freedom to act in accordance with my real will, with that part of my personality which identifies me most fundamentally, and this is to be understood as my moral self, as that part of my personality that wills morally right action. I am free, for the anarchists, to the extent that I am virtuous; to the extent, that is, that I govern myself in accordance with moral rules. Such a conception of freedom is, of course, by no means peculiar to the anarchists, but has a long history reaching back to the Greeks. I shall refer to this idea as 'moral self-direction'.

Godwin, for example distinguishes between "natural" and "moral" independence, respectively valuable and harmful kinds of freedom.<sup>9</sup> The latter consists in a refusal to acknowledge the constraints of moral duty, a refusal arising from the desire of "the present race of mankind ... to act as they please, without being accountable to the principles of reason". The principles of reason are for Godwin moral principles; to be directed by one's rationality, the authentic part of the personality



(in his phrase to exercise "private judgement"), is to employ one's reason vigorously in search of truth, which ultimately has a moral character. The kind of freedom that is Godwin's ideal is not only rational but moral self-direction. Similarly Proudhon castigates "the freedom to do anything that is disagreeable to anyone else".<sup>10</sup> "The freedom of which we have reason to be proud," he writes, "does not consist in liberation from the laws of truth and justice; quite on the contrary it grows in the measure to which we come closer to justice and truth".<sup>11</sup> Bakunin explicitly recognises in the idea of freedom a "positive" as well as a "negative" aspect, giving these terms essentially the same meaning as that outlined above, namely authentic self-direction on the one hand and non-interference on the other.<sup>12</sup> Again it is the positive idea that occupies him for the most part, and this requires obedience to self-imposed "natural laws" of morality: "the liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has *himself* recognised them as such ..."<sup>13</sup> Kropotkin's view, although not so explicit, is essentially the same, focusing upon a distinction between desirable and undesirable forms of individualism. While the latter merely expresses the ruthless egoism of Stirner and Nietzsche or the debased "law of minding one's own business" celebrated by American and English libertarians like Tucker, Spooner and Herbert Spencer, the former is obedient to the moral law of solidarity and mutual aid that is found in nature.<sup>14</sup>

There is, then, clear evidence on the face of the texts that the anarchists possess a conception of freedom as moral self-direction. However, one should in general beware of accepting isolated quotations as conclusive of anarchist intentions, and this is especially true when the subject is freedom. The anarchists also speak of freedom or liberty in other senses, and many of these have been seized on at one time or another as representing the central anarchist concept. The question to ask is, what role does a given conception play in the overall theory? The notion of freedom we are interested in here is that which is upheld by the anarchists as an especially important value, and I shall try to show how moral self-direction has that status. Too often what is identified by a commentator as the ideal anarchist freedom turns out on closer inspection to be no more than an instrumental value or even a notion of liberty that the anarchist writer actually rejects – the anarchists generally regard negative conceptions of liberty as falling within one of these two categories. But since I do not have time to show this here, I shall merely advance my reading as an alternative to its rivals, and suggest that it be accepted to the extent that it offers a



persuasive explanation of the anarchist case. This at any rate is a better test of interpretation than the mere citation of passages taken out of context.

The following review of the the anarchists' arguments in terms of freedom will proceed in two stages, each of which focuses upon a particular facet of their conception of moral self-direction. First, the anarchists' case against the state can be examined by way of their conception of the content of the moral rules that the free man must follow. Secondly, their constructive account of order in the desirable stateless society is illuminated by looking at their explanation of the procedure by which the moral law is known.

## II

All of the anarchists assume that there is an objective moral law, but they give varying accounts of the kind of conduct and the kind of social arrangements it requires. Godwin is an avowed utilitarian who commends the pleasures of benevolence, while Proudhon rejects uncompensated assistance in favour of strict reciprocity.<sup>15</sup> Both give a central place in the pictures they draw of the good society to aspects of self-sufficiency.<sup>16</sup> Bakunin and Kropotkin, on the other hand, both tend to emphasise the cultivation of sentiments of sympathy and brotherhood as a basis for an interdependent and solidaristic community – although they differ somewhat over the criteria on which such a community will distribute property.<sup>17</sup>

All four are agreed on one point, however, which is that moral self-direction is itself enjoined by the moral law, indeed is the highest value of all. The argument they adduce in support of this claim is very much like that of Rousseau in the *Social Contract* (ironically a work the anarchists profess to despise), namely that freedom in this sense is "the quality of man", the distinguishing feature of a fully-developed human being.<sup>18</sup> Thus for Godwin, "by as many instances as I act contrary to the unbiassed dictate of my own judgement, by so much I abdicate the most valuable part of the character of man".<sup>19</sup> Proudhon virtually reproduces Rousseau when he writes, "to renounce liberty is to renounce the nature of man: after that, how could we perform the acts of man?"<sup>20</sup> Bakunin regards freedom in the relevant sense as "the absolute condition of all that we admire and respect in humanity", and "the last phase and supreme goal of all human development".<sup>21</sup> For Kropotkin individual liberty is "the most valuable of all conquests".



We can be sure it will be attained eventually "just as we are persuaded beforehand that a child will one day walk on its two feet and not on all fours, simply because it is born of parents who belong to the genus *homo*"<sup>22</sup> It is because the anarchists conceive of the most valuable freedom as moral self-direction that they are able to use the Rousseauian argument to exhibit it as the most valuable possession of all. It is hard to see how such a claim could be made for freedom in the purely negative sense.

The commitment to moral self-direction is the major premise of the anarchists' chief line of argument against the state. The minor premise is that the state tends of its nature to destroy freedom in this sense.<sup>23</sup> It does this in three principal ways. The most obvious is the enforcement of its commands through the exercise of brute force or coercion. More often than not this will amount to the individual's being forced to act wrongly, since the ignorance and corruption of rulers means that their commands will seldom coincide with the moral law. But even if rulers did happen to command what was in fact right, their enforcement of right action would still destroy moral self-direction because it would destroy the authentic motivation requisite to it. If a person would not have acted rightly but for the state's intervention, the action in question is *ipso facto* performed out of prudence rather than morality. The case is basically the same with those who would have acted rightly anyway. Where in the absence of the state's intervention they would have acted with complete spontaneity, knowing that they could equally well do otherwise if they chose, the threat of sanction that stands behind the command of any effective state cannot fail to dilute the moral with the prudential.

States do not rely on force or the threat of force alone to control their subjects, but typically encourage them to obey willingly. The anarchist claim that this also leads to the destruction of freedom is again more easily explained if freedom is understood as moral self-direction rather than as a purely negative liberty. If I am free when I do whatever I happen to want to do, then if I want to comply with the orders of the state I am so far free. But moral self-direction requires not merely compliance with the empirical will, but compliance with the authentic or 'real' will – that is, compliance with moral rules for moral reasons that are 'one's own'. States, however, propagandise their authority in absolute terms; subjects are required to obey not because they have their own reasons for doing so, but simply because the state has a right to be obeyed whatever is commanded. Subjects who are obedient in these terms fail to be morally self-directing,



because even if the command they obey reflects the moral law their compliance is not the outcome of their own rational and moral will. Typically the authentic will is silenced or by-passed by the state's appeal to the lower, tribal passions. Devices like rituals and ceremonies, honours and traditions, and the mediation of religious belief through established churches, serve to impress upon people the legitimacy of a power they might otherwise question.

Thirdly, the notion of moral self-direction explains the connection made by the anarchists between loss of freedom under the state and conditions of domination arising from inequality in the economic sphere. Again Rousseau is a likely source for the anarchists' view, which summons up a picture very much like the image of corrupt modernity portrayed in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Modern commercial society, for the anarchists as for Rousseau, is characterised by the relations of 'dependence' that exist between rich and poor: the poor dependent on the rich for subsistence and the rich on the poor for the labour that is the source of their wealth. Neither the poor nor the rich can be virtuous or free because in their dealings with one another they are governed not by the moral law but by the exigencies of the struggle for wealth. Government originates as an ostensible solution to the violence and fraud into which relations between rich and poor break down. In reality the state is merely an instrument for protecting the property rights of the rich, thus perpetuating economic domination and with it the loss of moral self-direction. Because all are implicated in the corruption that government holds in place, unfreedom is spread like a contagion throughout society. Piecemeal reforms are inadequate; the only solution is society's total transformation and moral regeneration.

### III

The different anarchist thinkers diverge in the accounts they give of the detailed content of the moral law, but the tradition as a whole is at any rate agreed that in the name of individual moral self-direction morality requires the abolition of the state. In turning from the issue of the content of morality to that of the procedure by which it is to be found, we also pass from the purely critical or destructive phase of the anarchist case to its constructive aspect: the anarchists' account of the desirable stateless order.



It is common ground for the anarchists, as for most thinkers before the twentieth century, that there is an objective moral law which can be formulated as a set of factual or descriptive claims, and which can be known or apprehended by human beings. Beyond that neither the tradition as a whole nor any of its members individually have any completely consistent moral epistemology. Nevertheless, it is possible to hazard two further generalisations, subject to qualification in particular cases, about the broad tendency of the tradition in this connection. The first is that by and large the anarchists believe that the moral law is immanent in nature, that moral judgements state factual claims about the natural world. Their general tendency is toward what would now be called ethical naturalism. Thus Godwin refers to morality as "the system of the universe", and according to Proudhon, "between the world of nature and the world of justice ... all is identical".<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, they tend to suppose that the moral law of nature is, like other laws of nature, discoverable by the application of human reason, employing procedures based on or commencing with those of modern natural science in its investigations of the physical world. In this respect the tradition is broadly empiricist and positivist. The anarchists believe that moral knowledge will advance along with the growth of knowledge in the natural and social sciences – that, in Godwin's words, man's "moral improvement will in some degree keep pace with his intellectual".<sup>25</sup> This belief is a commonplace of progressive thought in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Godwin's utilitarianism is descended from Hume's "attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects" – the subtitle of the *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739). The purely descriptive Humean project of explaining the genesis of moral judgement in the broadly 'scientific' terminology of felt experience evolves by the end of the eighteenth century into Bentham's assertion that pleasure and pain "point out what we ought to do as well as what we shall do".<sup>26</sup> Godwin, too, is confident that the empirical investigation of "the visible system of the world" will yield the right answers to moral questions.<sup>27</sup> The European anarchists reject utilitarianism but not the scientific spirit that motivates it; indeed the connection between empirical science and moral prescription becomes still more explicit in their work under the influence of the 'positivist' tradition associated with Saint-Simon and Comte. The latter makes it clear that the method of the natural sciences can be expected to lead to the expansion not only of descriptive social science but also of ethics,



a truly scientific ethic becoming the crowning achievement of a "positive philosophy" that comprehends every legitimate field of enquiry.<sup>28</sup> Highly influential in its day, elements of Comte's system are adopted by Proudhon and the project as a whole is warmly praised by Bakunin.<sup>29</sup> The positivist approach is seen at its strongest in Kropotkin, however, who takes as his starting point the work of Darwin.<sup>30</sup> For Kropotkin, the true conclusion to be drawn from Darwin is that co-operation rather than competition within species is the dominant factor of "progressive evolution". Mutual aid rather than mutual struggle is therefore the natural course for man as for other species. On this basis, he believes, "a new realistic moral science" is possible.<sup>31</sup>

These are only broad tendencies, and a more detailed account than the present would introduce some substantial qualifications and exceptions. Proudhon in particular is impossible to categorise neatly on this issue, since he sometimes sounds more like an intuitionist than a positivist.<sup>32</sup> Bakunin warns against the danger of according science the status of an unquestionable authority on a level with government and religion.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the account I have given is sufficiently accurate in general to enable us to draw from it an important implication for the way – at least one way – the tradition as a whole reconciles freedom with order. For once freedom is conceived as involving adherence to an objective moral law that will eventually be accessible to all through the application of scientific method, the anarchist expectation that maximum liberty would be compatible with social order is not unreasonable. People who are free in the relevant sense will necessarily converge on a single scheme of morality recognisable to all. Once ethical claims are set on a truly scientific basis, they will compel belief in the same way that the natural sciences compel belief: by accumulated weight of evidence. Under conditions of advanced social and ethical science, the person who refuses to acknowledge the rightness of the course pointed out by that science will be like the person who refuses, against the evidence, to acknowledge the law of gravity. Proudhon draws just such a parallel. If a house is built in defiance of the laws of physics "its fall will be the sanction of its law. So it is with justice: it carries its sanction within itself; neither man nor society can subsist contrary to its rules".<sup>34</sup>

It might be objected that the anarchist theory of order is still not entirely convincing. Even if science is able to show us our duty, it remains actually to perform it; there is a gap between belief and action. This objection is met in Bakunin and Kropotkin by their emphasis on



man's capacity for sympathy and altruism, the sentiments that favour mutual aid and solidarity. Such tendencies are always present in human nature, and will be strengthened by the removal of the social and international divisions fostered by the state. When moral enlightenment is supplemented by a strong feeling of common cause with one's fellows, the anarchists would seem to have a reasonable case. Even if one is pessimistic about the likelihood of such sentiments ever emerging in sufficient strength to be very influential, the possibility of moral knowledge is itself a good reason for optimism about moral action. If moral knowledge does not guarantee virtue, it makes it more probable. I am more likely to fulfil my duty if I can see clearly what it is than if I have the excuse, or the genuine dilemma, of uncertainty. The case is still stronger in a society where there is a general agreement as to the moral truth. For then my convictions will be confirmed by the congruent opinions and arguments of those around me, and I shall probably have before me the practical example of their generally virtuous conduct.<sup>35</sup>

This is in accord with the general appearance and spirit of the various pictures the anarchists evoke of the stateless society. Virtue and freedom cannot flourish while people are still under the corrupt influence of the state, but the state's removal does not itself guarantee the triumph of virtue and freedom. Ultimately that can only be achieved by individuals for themselves. Moral self-direction requires an authentic commitment to right action which can neither be enforced nor merely copied uncritically from a lead supplied by others. Moreover, even given the requisite authentic judgement, there may be the possibility of backsliding.

Here we arrive at one respect in which the anarchists diverge from a typically utopian thought-pattern. Social utopias tend to lay claim to conditions of near-total perfection in which all problems and misfortunes have been banished and all the virtues achieved once and for all. The kind of society the anarchists have in mind, however, is one in which there remains a real possibility of wrongdoing. It is ultimately the task of individuals to understand and accept the teachings of the new science and to act accordingly, and in the attempt mistakes may well be made. In this the anarchist vision is much less utopian than that of Marx. While in the final communist epoch Marx envisages a form of life which the laws of historical materialism have rendered so integrated and harmonious that self-consciously 'moral' behaviour will be replaced by a kind of second nature, the anarchists concede that human beings must always strive with reason and will to realise



standards of conduct from which they might otherwise default. The optimism of the anarchists consists not in any conception of an ultimate and complete human perfection but in their belief that the spread of scientific knowledge will make the task of moral improvement easier than it would seem at present. Even if by some oversight one does go astray, it will be a relatively straightforward matter to be guided back to the right path by one's neighbours. Where "reason is omnipotent", as Godwin puts it, "if my conduct be wrong, a very simple statement, flowing from a clear and comprehensive view, will make it appear to be such".<sup>36</sup>

Correction by "simple statement" or argument is consistent with a primary commitment to freedom as moral self-direction, and is plausible when seen in the context of scientific optimism I have outlined. It is thus unnecessary to suppose, as both critics and defenders have done, that the anarchists are obliged to employ some form of public censure, or emotional pressure, in order to obtain social stability without the state.<sup>37</sup> It also explains why the anarchists are generally so confident not only about the continued cohesion of the stateless society, but also about the prospects for its achievement in the first place. This in turn points to another aspect of their thought which distinguishes the anarchists from merely utopian thinkers. Where utopian visions characteristically describe futuristic or exotic worlds to which the only access is through the imagination of the visionary, the anarchists provide a full account, one which is far from strange or unreasonable from a nineteenth-century perspective, of how mankind can (and will) reach the society of the future from that of the present. For the evidence of scientific advance is ubiquitous in the nineteenth century. If politics and morality are fit subjects for science, then man is already on the road to knowledge, thence realisation, of the best social arrangements.

#### IV

I have tried to show that the anarchist tradition I have described is tolerably self-consistent and persuasive if one accepts its basic premises. It will already be obvious, however, that its most basic premises would receive little support from most modern social and political theorists. The tradition's chief claims rest on the twin supports of teleology and ethical naturalism. The argument from freedom is teleological: moral self-direction is paramount among values because it is part of man's



nature in an Aristotelian sense – not observed in people as they are, but a feature of the ideal human specimen. Moreover, the very notion of moral self-direction implies an Aristotelian telos – in the identification of the authentic or ‘true’ self with the rational and moral part of the personality. Naturalism, as we saw, is the basis of the anarchists’ optimism about the future stateless order: only if morality is a feature of the natural world can the success of the natural sciences be expected to lead directly to enlightenment in the ethical sphere.

The difficulties connected with teleology and naturalism are the routine starting-points of contemporary moral thought, so there is little point in dwelling upon them here. Both doctrines have their modern defenders but the weight of opinion is very clearly against them. The dominant outlook would see as the chief offence of both, their attachment to eternal and universal values independent of history and culture. In addition, many theorists would point to their blurring of the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, to a confusion, when the anarchists talk about ‘the moral law’, between ‘law’ in two senses, the descriptive and the normative.

Another problem with the anarchist case is that its teleological and naturalistic components tend to pull away from each other. The one is rooted in a metaphysical tradition that is denied by the positivist impetus behind the other. On one hand this tension has the effect of undermining the anarchists’ cause for optimism. Throughout their work they can be seen striving for a scientific ethic that will light the way to the future, yet it is hard to see how the kind of freedom they uphold as their paramount value can be justified or even formulated according to the methods of natural science. On the other hand, the teleological conception and justification of freedom is itself undercut by the anarchists’ naturalism – and perhaps also by their emphasis on self-direction. For the teleological world-view had been kept in place by the authority of tradition, but in their insistence on the sovereignty of individual reason the anarchists inherit the Enlightenment spirit in which formerly received truths are thrown open to question. Caught between these competing tendencies, the writings of the anarchists may be seen as a microcosm of the shifting world-views of the nineteenth century.

It remains to give some brief consideration to the implications of the present analysis for anarchism as a living ideology. Many modern anarchists would claim intellectual descent from the nineteenth-century writers, and many more would at least look to them for occasional inspiration. But if the foregoing account is true the relation



between contemporary anarchists and their ancestors becomes problematic. In the unlikely event that any modern anarchists should take over the nineteenth-century case whole, they would lay themselves open to the objections I have just sketched. But if they merely make use of selected arguments for their own purposes, they may be prising those arguments loose from the context which originally gave them meaning and force. One example of this may be found in issues concerning freedom, another in the question of social order. What now could be the ground for claiming that freedom is the paramount good – indeed what sort of freedom could be accorded such a value? I suggested that a merely negative liberty is an improbable candidate for the supreme good; would a reformulated positive conception be any more likely? On the issue of social order, could any reason now be offered to expect that order might be obtained by convergence of moral judgement? If not, are there any other good reasons to anticipate the possibility of social order without the state? Those usually offered, for example the sense of solidarity generated by the exigency of revolutionary conditions, carry little weight once separated from the arguments and assumptions I have outlined.

I do not suggest that anarchism has come to an intellectual dead end. Even the main lines of the nineteenth-century case – the argument from freedom and the account of social order through moral convergence – might be capable of reformulation, and quite different lines of argument might also prove fruitful. Nevertheless, it is surely instructive for the contemporary anarchist to see the extent to which so much of the classical case is dependent on a context of background assumptions that are now largely discredited. To see this is not to concede the failure of all anarchist theory but to acknowledge some of the parameters of a successful anarchist theory of the future.

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## Notes

This paper is based on my doctoral thesis, a revised version of which is to be published by Oxford University Press. Earlier drafts of the paper benefited from the comments of those present at the Dubrovnik conference and of the members of the Topics in Political Theory Group convened in Oxford by Maarten Hajer and Ben Rogers.



References in the notes are to English editions where possible (as well as or instead of the original). Other translations are my own.

1. Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, transl. Benjamin R. Tucker (New York, 1970), p.277.
2. Proudhon, *Solution du probleme social* (Paris, 1848), p.119.
3. A recent version of this interpretation can be found in Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London, 1980), pp.7-11.
4. "Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal", in Roger N. Baldwin, ed., *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York, 1927), p.135.
5. The best-known statement of the distinction is found in Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London, 1969). My own views are developed in greater detail in "Negative and Positive Liberty", *Political Science* 40 (2) (1988), pp.57-73.
6. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, transl. T.M. Knox (London, 1952), paras 15, 149 A; Bakunin, *Oeuvres de Bakounine* (Paris, 1895-1913) vol.V, pp. 158 and 165 note, and I, 282-283: for English translations see G.P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York and London, 1953), pp. 271, 268. Another anarchist who recognises the distinction is Herbert Read, *Anarchy and Order* (London, 1953), p.161.
7. See, e.g., Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*. A similar view is implicit in the commonplace description of anarchism as "extreme individualism": e.g., John Bowle, *Politics and Opinion in the 19th Century* (London, 1954), p.140 (on Godwin); E.H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (London, 1975), pp. 434-435.
8. Ritter, *Anarchism: a Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge, 1980).
9. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Harmondsworth, 1976), Bk.VIII, viii, pp. 754-755.
10. *La Guerre et la paix*, in Stuart Edwards, ed., *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London, 1970), p.184.
11. *Du Principe de l'art* (Paris, 1875), pp. 45-46.
12. *Oeuvres V*, 158 and 165 note, I, 282-283: Maximoff, pp. 271, 268.
13. *God and the State* (New York, 1970), p.30.
14. "Modern Science and Anarchism", in *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, pp. 62, 172-173.
15. For Godwin on benevolence see *Political Justice* IV, xi, p.395; his views on the distribution of property are contained in Book VIII. Proudhon's commendation of reciprocity can be found throughout his work, but his rejection of unilateral aid or charity as a principle of justice emerges most clearly from the contrast he draws between society at large and the family. Unpurchased help is appropriate only in the latter, the realm of natural dependence. See, e.g., *De la Justice dans la Revolution et dans l'Eglise* (Paris, 1930-1935), vol.II, p.71.
16. See Godwin's attack on "co-operation": *Political Justice* VIII, Appendix. Proudhon recognises the need for collective enterprise in manufacturing industry, but sees workers as independent possessors of the products of their labour and of their labour itself: see, e.g., *De la Capacite politique des classes ouvrieres* (Paris, 1923), p.125.
17. The difference between Bakunin's "collectivism" and Kropotkin's "communism" is concisely summarised by James Guillaume in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal, 1980), pp. 157-158. See also David Miller, *Anarchism* (London, 1984), pp. 45-46.



18. *Social Contract* Bk.I, iv.
19. *Political Justice* II, vi, p.204.
20. *What Is Property?* p.45. Compare *Social Contract* I, iv: "to renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties".
21. *Oeuvres* I, 105.
22. "The Place of Anarchism in Socialistic Evolution", transl. Henry Glasse (London, 1890?), p.14; "Anarchist Morality", in *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, pp. 102-103.
23. A more detailed treatment of this theme, with textual references, is given in my *The Idea of Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Anarchism*, unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford 1987.
24. *Political Justice* VII, iii, p.644; *De la Justice* IV, 431-432.
25. *Political Justice* I, viii, p.157.
26. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham* (London, 1970), p.11.
27. *Political Justice* V, xv, 495.
28. *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris, 1830-1842), *Système de politique positive* (Paris, 1851-1854).
29. Proudhon's relation to Comte is discussed by Henri de Lubac. *The un-Marxian Socialist*, transl. R.E. Scantlebury (London, 1948), pp. 236-239. For Bakunin on Comte see *Oeuvres*, 69-73: Maximoff 73, 74.
30. In particular Darwin's *Descent of Man* (London, 1871). For Kropotkin's interpretation and development of Darwin see *Mutual Aid* (London, 1902), *Modern Science and Anarchism* (London, 1912), *Ethics: Origin and Development* transl. Louis S. Friedland and Joseph R. Piroshnikoff (New York, 1924).
31. *Ethics*, p.5.
32. Compare, e.g., *De la Justice* IV, 492 with *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1849), pp. 176-177: *Selected Writings*, pp. 252, 242.
33. *God and the State*, pp. 30-35.
34. *De la Justice* IV, 351.
35. See Bakunin's often-repeated assertion that one person's freedom is supported and augmented by the freedom of those around him: e.g., *Oeuvres* I, 281: Maximoff, pp. 267, 268.
36. *Political Justice* VII, iii, p.644.
37. Such an interpretation is presented from a point of view sympathetic to the anarchists by Alan Ritter, *Anarchism*. For a less sympathetic view see George Orwell, "Politics vs Literature", in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth, 1957), pp. 132-133.



*Laslo Sekelj*

## **Bakunin's and Kropotkin's Theories of Revolution in Comparative Perspective**

The pivotal point of the anarchist theory of revolution was expressed by Bakunin's and Kropotkin's assumption that anarchist society, i.e. the humanistic ideal of the just society is to be established not after the revolution but in the very process of the revolution. The differentia specifica of the anarchist theory of revolution compared to other socialist theories is the idea that the act of tearing down the old regime does not comprise the revolution but is only the preparatory stage of the revolution. The process of revolution is actually identical to the society for whose materialization it is being waged. It is in the revolution – and not after the revolution – that all forms of governmental principles are abolished, and a federation of communes and voluntary production and other associations, i.e. the society of anarchy, is established.

This is the mainstream of anarchism. Still, there were not only anarchist-practitioners who were not revolutionaries, but also theoreticians of anarchism who had never elaborated any theory of revolution, or who (like Novomirsky or late Arshinov) adopted some other (Bolshevik) concept of revolution. This essay will not enter into the complex issue of determination of what anarchism is, nor will it deal with distinctions between the particular trends of anarchism and the political theory of anarchism. The essay will focus on analysis of the theory of revolution of the founding fathers of the communist or collectivist version of the political theory of anarchism: Michael Bakunin (1814-1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). In other words, their theoretical works will be analysed, and in the case of Bakunin only his texts from his anarchist period, that is those written after 1866. Besides, some comparisons with certain elements of the theory of revolution of socialist competitors of anarchists – Marx and some of his followers – will be made.



### **The Roots: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**

Modern anarchism was founded by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865). All fractions of anarchism are indebted to Proudhon for their main ideas – among others, the distinction between social and political revolution. According to Proudhon, social revolution is a spontaneous and radical transformation of society. It is a revolution from below and its principle is “everything for the people and by the people, including the government”, in contrast to political revolution which is, according to Proudhon and his anarcho-communist followers, a revolution from above whose principle is “everything for the people, but by the state” and as a political revolution it is carried out by political parties. The (social) revolution from below, as opposed to political evolution of the political parties, arises spontaneously in the people and by the people. The people are not only the subject of revolution, they are also its direct executor. The goal of this spontaneous people’s social revolution, whose prototype Proudhon saw in the Paris February revolution of 1848, is “abolishing social authority over the people”.<sup>1</sup>

Proudhon sees the goal of political revolution, revolution from above, as establishing the power of one stratum of society or political party, in contrast to the governmentless goals of the social revolution from below. Political revolution, therefore, brings power to a particular political party, and regardless of the party in question, this only means a new form of government over the people – and not by the people – because every form of government, regardless of its specific content, is the establishment of an authority. In other words, every government for Proudhon is already by definition “a government above and over the people”.<sup>2</sup> Here is the fine distinction between anarchism as a theory of direct democracy and the liberal, even the radical, notion of democracy as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Abraham Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863).

### **Bakunin’s Anarchist Theory of Revolution**

It is historically significant that the pronounced antipolitical nature of social revolution, anarcho-communism, is indebted to P.J. Proudhon. In this respect it should be kept in mind that Proudhon’s antipolitical theoretical orientation was in practice more an ideal than a reality: he



was not only a representative in the French parliament elected in 1848, after the first elections with universal male franchise, but also the persistent agitator of the independent political activity of the working classes in his last work *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (1865).

In the first work from Bakunin's anarchist period, the brochure *Principles and Organisation of International Revolutionary-Socialist Secret Society* (1866), Proudhon's strong influence is present, above all from *Du principe fédératif* (1863) regarding the structure of a future just society of anarchy.<sup>3</sup> The theory of revolution represented in this brochure is explained in a more mature form in *The Program and Rules of a Secret Organisation of the International Brotherhood and International Alliance of Socialist Democracy* (1868), known as *The Alliance Brochure*, in the program and inner regulations of the organisation which, in Bakunin's own words, is founded in order to carry out and organise a universal social revolution whose goal is destroying the entire religious, aristocratic and bourgeois authority and power in Europe, which will be achieved by destroying all existing modern states with their entire political organisation. This revolution must be universal (European) and by no means national. "No political or national revolution can ever triumph unless it is transformed into a social revolution, and unless the national revolution, precisely because of its radically socialist character, which is destructive of the State, becomes a universal revolution."<sup>4</sup> Sharing with Karl Marx the idea of the free association of labour, Bakunin is writing about a new society of free associated labour, founded on collective ownership, equality and territorially built from below upward, which will be immediately established on the ruins of the old society.<sup>5</sup>

Bakunin is asking for human freedom: a necessary prerequisite to achieve this goal is the complete destruction of existing society and its institutions, above all the Church and the State.<sup>6</sup> The concept of freedom is, therefore, crucial for understanding the context of Bakunin's theory of revolution. In neo-anarchist literature on Bakunin, the evaluation is indisputable that his philosophy of revolution is one of freedom: "Freedom is the keystone of Bakunin's thought. The goal of history is the realization of freedom, and its driving force is the 'instinct of revolt'. Freedom is implicit in the social nature of Man and can be developed only in society, through the practice of mutual aid, which Bakunin calls 'solidarity'. Freedom is indissolubly linked to equality and justice in a society based on reciprocal respect for individual rights."<sup>7</sup> According to Bakunin, freedom is possible only in



the society of anarchy, for only the society without the state and ownership provides the necessary prerequisite for positive freedom. The transition from the existing society of unfreedom, which is subject to both juridical (state) and spiritual (church) authority, to the society of freedom is impossible without complete destruction of the society as it is in the process of self-liberation of people. That process of transition of both individual and society from the state of slavery to the state of freedom is the predominant preoccupation of Bakunin's theory of revolution. Those who criticised Bakunin reduced his theory to a sheer act of destruction. Thus, for example, Rainer Beer defines and interprets Bakunin's philosophy of revolution as a developed system of pan-destruction.<sup>8</sup> In the blare of conflict within the First International, Marx<sup>9</sup> and the vast majority of his followers, almost without exception, interpreted Bakunin's anarchist theory of revolution as voluntarism and revolutionary Machiavellianism. As will be shown, the same accusation would be raised by the social-democratic critics of Bolshevism, in their literal repetition of Marx's arguments against Bakunin. (For example: Wilhelm Bloss: *Marx oder Bakunin?* Stuttgart 1920.)

In his theoretical writings on social revolution, Bakunin attempted to reconcile two things: his practical activity from the pre-anarchist period, connected to secret conspiratorial groups, and the theoretical concept of anarchist revolution as pure spontaneity of popular uprising, within which the very revolutionary act reproduces the structure of the society of anarchy: "There is no doubt that this new life – the popular revolution – will in good time organise itself, but it will create its revolutionary organisation from the bottom up, from the circumference to the centre, in accordance with the principle of liberty, and not from the top down or from the centre to the circumference in the manner of all authority. It matters little to us if that authority is called, Church, Monarchy, constitutional State, bourgeois Republic or even revolutionary Dictatorship. We detest and reject all of them equally as the unfailing sources of exploitation and despotism."<sup>10</sup> But in the same brochure, Bakunin paid his tribute to his past, and to revolutionary romanticism of early nineteenth century, concerning the role of revolutionary organisation, giving an extremely important role and special function to the mediator between revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice. Namely, Bakunin assigns the role of intermediary to confirmed members (100 in number) of the hierarchical and centralised revolutionary organisation. The revolutions are not made by individuals or even by a secret society.



They break out by themselves, by the movement of events and facts; they are prepared in the depth of the instinctive convictions of the common people and then break out, often encouraged by an insignificant motive. Here, to the revolution conceived as pure spontaneity, the external intervention is added – intervention of the same kind which Kautsky and Lenin were to advocate 34 years later: “The revolutionary cadres (the intellectuals) are introducing the socialist consciousness from without into the working class.”<sup>11</sup> As for Bakunin, it was the assistance of a well-organised secret society, at the birth of the revolution, to the masses in broadening their instinct and in organising some type of revolutionary general staff composed of proven friends – by their individual merit – of people who are capable of serving as mediators between revolutionary ideas and the people’s instinct.<sup>12</sup>

With Bakunin, as indirectly with Lenin and Kautsky, it is actually the idea of merit. It is worthwhile to approach the assumption of merit in comparative perspective. Classical liberalism views election as a distinctly individual act and the one who is elected represents individual merit primarily and does not represent any specific or particular interest. For example, Sir William Younge in the House of Commons 1745: “By our constitution after a gentleman is chosen, he is the representative, or if you please the attorney of the people of England.”<sup>13</sup> The same meaning has John Stuart Mill’s understanding of parliament as the place of free discussion of unbanned individuals chosen exclusively for their merit. This individual merit of “proven friends” was the quality Lenin himself considered crucial for professional revolutionaries and their general staff – Central Committee and Politbureau of the Communist Party. The neo-Bolshevik communist regimes, the Yugoslav one included, gradually gave up the charisma of a general staff of professional revolutionaries, still preserving the idea of merit in the sense of parliamentarians: “Choose the best” used to be the leading pre-election slogan of the elections in which there was no choice. However, for Bakunin, in theory, the role of this cadre organisation is limited to propaganda of political and philosophical ideas aimed toward self-understanding of common people’s ideas and interests to be used for articulation of their spontaneous rebellion against the existing, inhumane bourgeois class society and the State. Similar ideas could be found in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg.<sup>14</sup> But in practice, she did exactly the opposite (in the aftermath of the German November revolution 1918) as did Bakunin in his political activity.



Bakunin was, however, even on the level of theory, not conscious of the immanent contradiction of his understanding of spontaneity-revolutionary organisation relationship. Thus it happened that in an article written in 1869 he made the sharpest attack on the young academic "socialist-conspirators" who, according to Bakunin, have formed organisations supposedly for the people's needs, but that existed outside the people and, as it were, over the people.<sup>15</sup> In this respect Bakunin forgot that both the above-mentioned programs of the Socialist secret society and of the Alliance of Socialist Democracy were of just this kind. Bakunin also attacked "conspiratorial socialists" for their plotting tactic from which it follows that they want to teach the people (in modern language 'raise the consciousness') instead of people teaching them,<sup>16</sup> forgetting that two years earlier, he had seen the very same task as the goal of the Alliance. That is on the level of theory. In practice, in his anarchist period too, the above-mentioned theoretical criticism did not stand in Bakunin's way of getting involved in several unsuccessful conspiratorial attempts in Russia (the Nechaev affair), in Italy, in Spain, as well as his active participation in establishing the unlucky Lyons Commune. Both, Bakunin and the Lyons members of the Alliance, were operating in the Lyons uprising exactly according to the model that Bakunin criticised in the above-mentioned article.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, of special importance is Bakunin's letter to Albert Richard in 1870. There, he links the achievement of the humanistic ideal of the just society (a society of anarchy) exclusively to a society of "...revolutionary anarchy, which will everywhere be accompanied by an invisible collective power, the only dictatorship I will accept, because it alone is compatible with the aspirations of the people and the full dynamic thrust of the revolutionary movement!" After giving a closer description of revolutionary anarchy, the society that is created immediately after the very act of destroying the state and abolishing private property and all institutions based on these two foundations, Bakunin continues: "We must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution, not by any kind of overt power but the collective dictatorship of all our allies, a dictatorship without tricks, without official titles, without official rights, and therefore all the more powerful, as it does not carry the trappings of power."<sup>18</sup> In this concept of "collective dictatorship" G.D.H. Cole finds the link between Bakunin's anarchist theory of revolution and Marx's concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>19</sup> If one bears in mind that two years earlier, in an instructive letter (*the Level of Practice*) Bakunin defended



the need for a revolutionary organisation whose activity – and not that of the masses – would lead to revolution, and the need for its centralisation as well,<sup>20</sup> that he proceeded thus in the statutes of both above-mentioned revolutionary associations – consequently, once can conclude, that in the ‘negative’ phase of revolution, i.e. the preparation and enactment of a forced overthrow of the old regime, Bakunin sees the people as the subject but guided by the organisation of confirmed anarchists, so that in the next ‘positive’ phase of revolution that is directly merged with the previous construction of a society of anarchy, this organisation is deprived of all prerogatives of authority. On the other hand, in his opposition to Marxists and Blanquists, Bakunin reaffirms the concept of revolution as pure spontaneity, for example, and not only by chance, in his interpretation of the Paris Commune of 1871.<sup>21</sup> There was a gap between theory and practice of revolution in Bakunin’s anarchist period as well. But, as we have seen, even on the level of the theory there is constant tension between the notion of the revolution, between spontaneity and revolutionary organisation, which caused immanent contradictions within Bakunin’s theory of revolution and his revolutionary practice, and of his anarchism in general, as well.

### Statism and Anarchy

This is the most mature work of Bakunin and the most important one for his anarchist theory. Two essential characteristics of Bakunin’s anarchist theory of revolution are stressed in *Statehood and Anarchy*: the revolution is a social and not a political one. On the other hand, contrary to Proudhon, Bakunin was consistent in making a distinction between social and political revolution. In the same vein, it is clear that his anarchist theory of revolution no longer – as in the period up to his arrest in 1849 and later on in his pre-anarchist period – has any connection whatsoever with the romantic pan-Slavic and utopian designs for revolution, such as the plans for overthrowing the tsarist rule in Russia, taking over power in Prague, or the Polish uprising. Bakunin’s anarchist theory of revolution is certainly not any longer the theory of revolution of a *déclassé* intellectual, as the Marxists have usually evaluated it: for example, the editor of his *Confessions* (1857), an official publication in Soviet Russia in 1921, Vyacheslav Polonski, underlining in the Foreword, that Bakunin as revolutionary is “a true *déclassé* intellectual rid of links to any class and its psychology, without



its own firm place in the general, rising chaos of social and political conflicts."<sup>22</sup>

An abstraction called "people" as the subject of revolution is the vague point of anarchist theory of revolution, just as another abstraction called "the proletariat" is the vague point of Marxism. Namely, the theory of revolution necessitates a clearly defined subject which turns theory to practice. In his critique of anarchism a scholar belonging to the Frankfurt School, Hans Mayer, outlined that the "people" is not a determination in the sense of logical rule "omni determinatio negatio est". Namely, that category is everywhere and always present, and therefore actually nowhere.<sup>23</sup> In *Statism and Anarchy*, the subject of revolution is no longer a vague "people" but the working class in England, Italy, France and Spain; the peasantry in Russia and workers and peasants in Germany. Hence, contrary to Marx and his notion of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject, in the early 1870s, Bakunin conceived the subject of the revolution in empirical terms of the two concrete social strata: industrial workers and peasants (agricultural workers). But the social revolution is impossible without class consciousness, though he did not call it thus. Universal public and private bankruptcy and the complete destruction of the state are two necessary preconditions for social revolution; in terms of creating a just society, these pitiful million workers, for Bakunin, are not yet sufficient cause for revolution. They only result in local rebellions; for revolution, this wretched proletariat must also possess a common goal, belief in their rights and consciousness that nothing can be expected from the privileged classes and from the existing state in general in terms of political activity, political emancipation and the political struggle including the demand for universal franchise.<sup>24</sup> This openly anti-political position of the later Bakunin was contrary to the views of P.J. Proudhon exposed in his last work *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, but also to the policy of the International Workingmen's Association, and was to become the cause of the conflict with Marx and eventually lead to the definitive split in the First International.

In Bakunin's opinion, only the existing, given working class of the Romance language countries and England is capable of carrying out social revolution. In Germany the revolutionary subject would be workers and peasants and in Russia the peasantry. But in Germany, as well as in Russia, the preceding change in actual consciousness of the working class (Germany) and peasantry (Russia) was necessary. The criterion for adoption of the actual working class as the subject



of revolution was the assumed influence of the Alliance, i.e. Marx and the Social-democracy. Bakunin firmly believed that his imaginary organisation, the Alliance of Socialist Democracy, had the dominant influence in the working classes of Roman countries, even once expanding it to England, seeing these countries as different from Germany in which the working class is completely pervaded with statism, primarily due to the activities of Marx and the Social Democratic Party, secondly to the tradition of German people and the collapse of peasants' revolution in the sixteenth century. To Bakunin, Germany was the only true state in Europe (in terms of centralised, authoritarian and militaristic state) and the predominant stratum of the German working class was composed of privileged "bourgeoisized workers"<sup>25</sup> (so, Lenin was not the first to speak of "working class aristocracy").

The basic idea of this book is that the entire space of the contemporary world (1870s) is divided into two parts, without any mediation or transition between them. These two extreme poles are statism and anarchy. Using the methodological process of reduction, Bakunin assigns to statism all political orientations that represent the need for authority of any kind. For Bakunin, as a consequence of his firm antipolitical determination of his theory of revolution, there are no real differences between dictatorship and representative government, liberals and conservatives, right and left, bourgeois moderates and radicals, democracy and oligarchy, Blanquists and Marxists. "Between revolutionary dictatorship and the state principle the difference is only in external situation. In substance both are one and the same: the ruling of the majority by the minority in the name of the alleged stupidity of the first and the alleged superior intelligence of the second. Therefore, both are equally reactionary, both having as their result the invariable consolidation of the political and economic privileges of the ruling minority and the political and economic enslavement of the masses of people."<sup>26</sup>

Passionately yearning for revolution, Bakunin predicts in *Statism and Anarchy* that one or another of the European countries is on the very eve of revolution and that it is "the closest" to revolution. But this was the usual mode of reasoning among the revolutionary socialists. The attentive reading of Marx's writings discloses that Bakunin's great competitor and contemporary, whom generations used to praise as the founder of "the scientific socialism" followed the same manner.<sup>27</sup> However, Bakunin's analysis of the situation in Russia in the 1870s is a comprehensive part of the discussion between traditionalists



and modernists, i.e. between 'Slavonophiles' and 'Westerners', and an important constituent part of his newly evaluated anarchist theory of revolution.

Bakunin, without denying the importance of the workers from the large cities and industrial areas of Russia, still sees in the peasantry the deciding role of social revolution in Russia. Sometimes, Bakunin speaks about the important role of the lumpen-proletariat in a Russian context as well. At the same time, he underscores that the Russian peasantry will not be a relevant revolutionary subject as long as it does not liberate itself from the impact of the Russian statism and Orthodox Church, i.e. of the ideological manipulation through the myth of the divine "Big Brother Tsar". A further point is the formation of some kind of class consciousness: Without "a common ideal", the Russian peasantry will not be capable of revolution, rather only of isolated, regional rebellions. The entire people, millions of urban and rural workers, must rise to the level of a common consciousness. This consciousness, however, is by no means, as with Kautsky and Lenin, identified with something that the intellectuals are introducing from without – on the contrary: it is something that the common people instinctively carried within them for generations. The role of the intellectuals – renegades from the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, the so called 'intelligentsia' – is to elevate to consciousness what instinctively exists in the common people on the basis of their own tradition. Enlightenment of something which is immanent, and eventually to organise the revolutionary subject is the role of the 'spiritual proletariat'.<sup>28</sup> But Bakunin is not a traditionalist. He considers that the revolution could be founded on the tradition of Russian rural life, but only with the prerequisite of a critical examination of this tradition within the framework of overall peasantry. The tradition of the mir, the specific Russian institution of village community, is according to Bakunin comprised of two different kinds of issues. On the positive side are the following three elements:

1. The people's belief that the land belongs to everyone;
2. The tradition of collective farms and joint distribution of the fruits of labour within the mir;
3. The expressed anti-state tradition of the local self-government.

On the other (negative) side, are two crucial factors. One is ideological: the patriarchy – the authority and authoritarianism rooted in the divinization of the Tsar and of the Holy Church. The other negative element of the existing tradition is its perversion, due to



private interests formed on the ground of the village municipality's disintegration, i.e. with beginning of modernisation started also the influence of capitalism in agriculture. This is the reason why the role of the 'spiritual proletariat' is to bring the peasantry to critical consciousness, which would bring them back to their roots, to their own authentic tradition. The self-liberation of the authoritarian personality is the task of the intelligentsia, while the tradition of the mir in its authentic form is for Bakunin a necessary pre-condition for social revolution in Russia.<sup>29</sup>

As can be seen, "going to the people" in *Statism and Anarchy* no longer, as in 1869, means that intellectuals should be taught by the people (peasantry), but now concerns the process of learning from each other. Bakunin here transcends the traditionalist positions of the narodniks, the very influential wing of the Russian revolutionaries of his age. Soviet Marxist-Leninist critics of Bakunin overlook this fact, underscoring at the same time that Bakunin did not see the rising proletariat as the subject of revolution in Russia.<sup>30</sup> Inside the framework of Marxism-Leninism, it might even be correct, however it should be noted that the reason for this view concerning the proletariat is that while Bakunin thought that by revolution based on a transformed mir Russia could escape capitalism,<sup>31</sup> it is another matter, whether true or not in the 1870s, not to see the revolutionary subject in the "rising proletariat in Russia" when in 1912, that is after 50 years of modernisation, the working class was represented with only 14.7% and peasants with two-thirds of the total population of Russia.

### **Kropotkin: Mutual Aid as the Foundation of the Revolution**

Kropotkin represents the next generation of the anarcho-communists. In England and on the Continent from the late 1880s, he symbolised the Russian dissident, and was a very influential non-fiction writer. In contrast to Proudhon, Kropotkin wants to abolish and to transcend the capitalist production relations. His anarcho-communism is based mainly on Bakunin's later writings, and he was, if not the founder of this form of anarchism, then its most influential theoretician due to the fact that his writings were translated at the turn of the century into more than sixty languages. Some sources even claim that until the First World War, Peter Kropotkin was second only to the Bible in the number of non-fiction translations worldwide.



Kropotkin's theory of revolution, contrary to Bakunin's, is of a predictable type. He founds it on anthropological and historical sets of argument and polemic against the mainstreams of Social Darwinism (Huxley and Spencer). The anthropological argument is based on his assertion that the instinct of mutual aid is an invariable attribute of human nature – as well as of the totality of nature. The instinct of mutual aid, and not the instinct of the struggle for existence, is the dominant factor of evolution (in the whole of nature). According to Kropotkin, mutual aid is natural, therefore the only adequate form of human (and of all natural) organisation. Self-conscious solidarity means, thus, a full social equality and excludes every possible form of man's domination over man. Accordingly, anarchy as lack of government or self-government is the form of social organisation immanent in human nature, and not the state as the form of domination through coercion of the minority over the majority. In *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution* (1902), Kropotkin best expounded the historical sets of arguments as well, allowing that the struggle for existence is a factor of evolution, but he explicitly denies that it is the *dominant* factor, according that status to mutual aid. Throughout history mankind ("people") have lived within governmentless organisations based on the principles of mutual aid: clan, stem, village community (mir), guilds, and city-communes. Until the apparatus of the centralised states in the sixteenth century, these institutions created a world of united and noncoercive face-to-face and local communities in which the vast majority of mankind used to live, and in which a minority still is living. This world of the institutions of mutual aid was indigenous, and parallel to the minority world of authority and dominance of the instinct of struggle for existence. The new institution of the struggle for existence, the centralised state, abolished this indigenous behaviour, i.e. a parallel existent society based on the instinct of mutual aid. For this reason Kropotkin sees the task of social revolution as re-establishing society structured on the principle of mutual aid, but no longer as local communities, rather as a global society of anarchist communism.<sup>32</sup> Within the framework of an ahistorical concept, Kropotkin believed – and this is typical for the whole of anarchism and all his fellow social utopians – that such a society could be established everywhere and any time in history.

Contrary to this notion that no objective preconditions for establishing the classless society are needed, Marx and orthodox Marxism insisted on three objective preconditions of communist or classless society: highly developed productive forces (the historical task of



capitalism), highly developed civil society, and existence of the self-conscious working class as the vast majority of the general population. A good parallel to Kropotkin's ahistoricism could be found, however, in Lenin's proclamation of communism in Soviet Russia after the October revolution, and the negation of Marx's and orthodox Marxists' economic determinism by his followers.<sup>33</sup>

Positivism had strongly influenced all socialists in the nineteenth century. Marx in his foreword to *Das Kapital*, Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, orthodox Marxism, all this is summarised in following Kautsky's definition of so-called historical materialism: "The meaning of historical materialism is in the idea that it provides us with the knowledge that development of society follows the natural necessity in accordance with the iron laws of material determinations independent from consciousness and will of individuals."<sup>34</sup> In this tradition is Kropotkin's definition of anarchism as a positive science.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, he sought for 'positive' proofs in the existing world for his main idea about the immanent quasi-natural necessity of the ultimate establishment of anarchist communism as this new (and modern) form of the institution of mutual aid. These "positive tendencies" – like the institution of the mir (or what remained of it) and for Europe different kinds of private and public voluntary organisations<sup>36</sup> – were for Kropotkin supposedly proofs for the foundation of anarchist theory in existing society,<sup>37</sup> seeing that the real meaning of his argument about the natural and necessary coming of anarchist communism means only that "coming might is right". Namely, if inevitable laws of evolution are to bring about a new victorious institution of mutual aid, and if the present bears "positive proofs" to that, then Kropotkin simply claims that we ought to support something which, as a "coming might", would come into being independently of our engagement. As we know and not only from Karl Popper, this kind of argumentation was a commonplace among the older socialists and communists. In fact, orthodox Marxism as a whole, from Engels to Kautsky, the Erfurt Programme of German Social Democracy and Lenin, was based upon the idea of the unavoidability of the collapse of capitalism and the objective necessity of the coming of socialism; there has actually been no Marxist who has not in some way advocated this view.<sup>38</sup>

As stressed by Kropotkin's anarchist follower, Errico Malatesta, the direct consequence of Kropotkin's notion about the natural necessity of revolution is the revolutionary absenteeism, the idea that revolution will come as a kind of natural phenomenon without a long



period of step-by-step organised day-to-day activity.<sup>39</sup> But not according to Kropotkin. On the contrary, revolutionary activism is based on this quasi-positivism, while social development tendencies only take on their final form with revolution: "Anarchists feel that the slow evolution of society, as evolution in nature, is accompanied from time to time by periods of accelerated evolution that are called revolutions, and they feel that the era of revolution has not yet ended."<sup>40</sup> In this context, revolution is a purely technical act of proclaiming, or at best, technical improvement of the natural process of evolution. Therefore, one could hardly speak of Kropotkin's theory of revolution. In contrast to Bakunin's anarchist theory of revolution Kropotkin, until the revolution of 1905, strongly shared the classical narodniks' position "of going to the people". Kropotkin expands the concept of revolution as a spontaneous movement of the masses to the totality of history. He understands the history of mankind exclusively as the development of mutual aid institutions, spontaneously created by the people. Contrary to Bakunin, Kropotkin always used the term "people" for the notion of an undifferentiated mass,<sup>41</sup> and this mass is the subject of the revolution. Revolution is just another name for this new institution of mutual aid created by the masses. In full accordance with this, and neglecting his previous definition of anarchism as a positive science, Kropotkin defines anarchism as a theory in the following manner: "As socialism in general and all other social movements, anarchism was born in the people and did not arise from science or some philosophical school. Anarchism will continue to be full of life and creative power if it continues as a thing of the people."<sup>42</sup> With this we come to Kropotkin's understanding of the revolution until his shift to revolutionary syndicalism. The people (masses) start the revolution due to the fact that they have already clearly formulated within themselves what they want. They come to these ideas through an organisation that they previously formed themselves, based on the very same principles as those of the society they want to create by revolution: complete equality of members, absence of any form of authority and the full implementation of direct democracy. These guiding ideas are the fruit of long evolution of the people's common sense.<sup>43</sup> This concept served Kropotkin as basis for his description of the practical model of anarchist revolution as explained in his *Conquest of Bread* (1892) produced by (imaginary) people of Paris. Accordingly, the very act of tearing down the old regime is a short-lived process. A new society is directly attached to it: the very next day communism of production and consumption is established by



abolishing private property and the division of labour. On the other hand, political self-government is established through the communes and the federation of communes by abolishing all authoritarian political institutions.<sup>44</sup>

This ideology of "the very next day after the revolution" was the commonplace of nineteenth century socialism on the Continent. It was not the prerogative of 'utopian socialism', but was found in very popular literature which also brought about considerable fame to 'scientific socialists', the so called orthodox followers of Karl Marx. Thus, the most popular of August Bebel's works, *Woman and Socialism* (1878),<sup>45</sup> could be hardly distinguished from Kropotkin's *The Conquest of the Bread*. The only difference lies in a different approach to the role of women under communism – but the process of revolution was hardly mentioned by either Bebel or Kropotkin. In the same vein were written many considerations about 'the future state' by the authors belong to German Social-Democracy, beginning with Karl Kautsky's official comment of the new Party Program,<sup>46</sup> or Anton Pannekoek's,<sup>47</sup> and Wilhelm Liebknecht's<sup>48</sup> – among others – on the same subject. All these belong to the same kind of wishful thinking as Kropotkin's 'utopianism', for neither of them deals with the problem of connecting communism or socialism with the existing world. In short, the gap between what ought to be and what is was even not transcended by Karl Marx, for even he – contrary to Engels' understanding of Marxism as 'scientific socialism' – lacks the theory of revolution as an empirical strategy, as an empirical strategical concept, contrary to those socialists who had either undertaken the essential revision of the original Marxism, like Eduard Bernstein,<sup>49</sup> or rejected the theory and practice of revolution, as had Ramsay MacDonald.<sup>50</sup>

### **Revolutionary Theory and the Practice of Three Russian Revolutions**

The Russian revolution of 1905 meant a great failure for the anarchists although, at least in the first phase, it was close to their expectations. In this respect, it was for the most part a spontaneous mass movement of the urban working class, lumpen-proletariat (in Bakunin's sense) and partially of the agricultural working class. Except in several less important towns, the anarchists were more observers than active participants. Failure was all the greater because, as was shown by



1917, anarchism did not – contrary to Marxism (R. Luxemburg and Lenin in other words) – learn any lesson from it. Kropotkin's brochure *Anarchism in Russia* (1906) is the best indication of this. It does not contain a single criticism of the practice of anarchism, and continues to defend the theory of revolution as "pure spontaneity", although in a modified form. The general strike now becomes the means to overthrow the old order and the goal of the anarchist organisation is to "inform the broad mass of the people with anarchist ideas, to teach the people by general strike and to demonstrate the needlessness of small, partial strikes".<sup>51</sup> In the next brochure, *The Russian Revolution and Anarchism* (1907), Kropotkin feels that "unions are natural bodies for direct struggle with capitalism and for building the future order", but the exclusively proletarian class nature of anarcho-syndicalism is criticised as well.<sup>52</sup> Rejection of the political struggle, of course, remained the constant feature of all forms of anarchism. In the brochure *Syndicalism and Anarchism* (1908) syndicalism is for Kropotkin only a new name for the old (i.e. anarchist) tactic of labour's direct struggle against capital, and this tactic and its means, a general strike as opposed to all forms of political struggle (and participation in politics), are a composite part of anarchism.<sup>53</sup>

Following the October revolution, some anarchists, for example Novomirski, had adopted the Bolshevik theory of revolution, and began to see the meaning of their activity in the elaboration of the "anarchist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat"<sup>54</sup> The others, like Pyotr Arshinov, had remained for a while within the enlightenment concept of organisation and supported the traditional anarchist theory of revolution, very similar to Kropotkin's.<sup>55</sup> But later on, he himself was to become very critical in his considerations of this concept, and found it the main reason of the defeat of anarchism in Russian revolutions.<sup>56</sup> But this was not the mainstream of anarchism. Quite apart from Kropotkin's critique of Lenin and Bolshevism, the theory of revolution as such remained more or less identical to the one from syndicalist pamphlets.<sup>57</sup> The same could be said of both Bakunin's and Kropotkin's followers, among which the most famous were Alexander Berkman<sup>58</sup> and V.M. Eichenbaum.<sup>59</sup> So the October revolution meant the end of the anarchist movement in Russia, and the end of any significant development of the political and social theory of anarchism as well. "There are no great anarchist thinkers in this century such as Proudhon or Kropotkin. In this regard, the thought is often encountered – even in works appearing after the Second World War – that basically nothing changed: capitalism and



the state still exist. But just this phrase shows that much changed in reality: above all, anarchism, as a workers' movement between the two wars and after the Second World War, was a failure; anarchism lost considerably both in action and in effect."<sup>60</sup>

### **The anarchist movement and organisation**

Until approaching revolutionary syndicalism (so called anarcho-syndicalism), Kropotkin does not speak of organisation as an active intermediary between theory and practice. He does not see in this lack of operability of a revolutionary theory a rift between theory and practice, but rather the exact opposite – their common identity, which is understood quixotically and presented as real. Contrary to Bakunin, Kropotkin remained on the level of the eighteenth century enlightenment: for him, only the "people", the undifferentiated third estate, exists opposite to the "rich minority" and its social and political institutions. After 1905, in his syndicalist period, Kropotkin simply renamed "the people" into the working class. But even then Kropotkin had something different in mind from the Marxist concept of the proletariat. With him, as with Bakunin, it is a matter of the empirical working class and not, as with Marx, the concept of the proletariat as a class possessing not only consciousness by itself, but consciousness of itself.

Organisation is the weakest point of anarchism. The question is not just that until now there has not been any convincing anarchist theory of organisation, as has been stressed by one contemporary anarchist, Colin Ward;<sup>61</sup> the question is: is it possible at all? Practical experience leads to a negative answer. Having in mind the *differentia specifica* of the anarchist theory of revolution – the identity of the revolutionary organisation with the post-revolutionary society – the anarchists from 1872 all the way until 1907 tried to form their own International. All of these enterprises were unsuccessful. A good program, but no way of building the organisation on that program, characterised the splinter group of the First International, which formed an Autonomous International in 1872 and eventually held unsuccessful congresses in 1874, 1876, and 1877.<sup>62</sup> A new organisational misfortune was the international congress of revolutionary socialists in London, July 14-19, 1881. The same can be said for the international congress of anarchists held in Amsterdam in 1907; the next congress planned for 1909 was never held. The five-member Coordinating Bureau of



the Anarchist International stopped working in 1914, making reference to 'general apathy'.<sup>63</sup>

Three factors were immanent in the organisational failure of anarchism. The organisation being mediator between revolutionary theory and practice, and the executor of the theory of revolution; the general failure of anarchist theory of revolution, Bakunin's and Kropotkin's in particular, seems obvious. The first is the formal, abstract and unhistorically understood principle of autonomy within the organisation. The second factor is the contradiction immanent in Bakunin's concept of the revolutionary organisation that became apparent during the agitation in favour of the creation of the Alliance. This concerns the idea that a secret organisation of trusted anarchist cadres should exist parallel to a loose public organisation.<sup>64</sup> This idea extends throughout the history of anarchism. For example, Kropotkin proposed such a twofold organisation to Malatesta on the eve of the congress in London in 1881. In a letter to Jean Grave (July 3, 1902), Kropotkin once more proposes the twofold organisation, writing of the need for an "intimate alliance of people who know each other" within the Workingmen's (i.e. the Anarchist) International.<sup>65</sup> But, by the way, these organisational ideas were very close to the tactic of the Third (Communist) International and connected with Lenin's concept of the Party as the vanguard of the proletariat. The third factor is a certain type of millenarianism, so typical of anarchism. As Georg Stiecklow points out, "the program and tactics of the anarchist International were to a large part determine by a deep belief in the imminent outbreak of social revolution. This belief was renewed in waves after every international congress. But since this was not achieved immediately, apathy followed and resignation from any kind of long-term organisational activity."<sup>66</sup>

These immanent weaknesses in the anarchist theory of organisation can also be seen as the result of the absence of an organisation that would correspond to the political, economical, social and ideological conditions of the period in which the anarchists were active. And this is certainly one of two results of the anarchist, and anarcho-communist in particular, dogma on restraining from any political activity whatsoever that does not have the immediate goal of the victory of the social revolution, i.e. the immediate realisation of the governmentless (and classless) society of anarchy. In this manner, anarchism was removed to the periphery of social events in the name of revolutionary and moral purity, and slowly sank to the level of a sect. But, at the same time, this very purity at the expense of marginality allowed



the anarchists, Bakunin and Kropotkin in particular, to make theoretically (but not practically) very successful criticism, first of Karl Marx and after that of the practice of Marxism of the Second International (social democracy) and of the Third International (bolshevik communism). This criticism arose from the fundamental idea of the anarchist theory of revolution: that revolution is not simply a seizure of state-power but is identical with the humanist ideal of a just society, i.e. classless and governmentless society – with a society of freely associated individuals and groups – for whose establishment it breaks out. This is certainly the greatest contribution of anarchism to both political theory and socialist thought.

## Notes

1. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: *Les confessions d'un revolutionnaire*. 3rd edition. Paris 1951.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Primarily in Section II under the title "Revolutionary Catechism" (not to be confused with same work of Nechaev) Michail Bakunin: *Revolutionary Catechism*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 76-97.
4. Michael Bakunin: *The Program of the International Brotherhood*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 152-154.
5. Michael Bakunin: *Gosudarstvennost i Anarkhiia*. Petrograd i Moskva 1919, p.239.
6. Michael Bakunin: *God and the State*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 238-239.
7. Sam Dolgoff: Introduction. In: *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, p.5.
8. Reiner Beer: *Einleitung*. In: R. Beer, ed. *Michael Bakunin, Philosophie der Tat*. Koeln 1968, p.35.
9. Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels. *Ein Komplot gegen die Internationale Arbeiter-Assoziation*. In: Marx-Engels. *Werke*. vol. 18. Berlin 1962, pp. 396-437.
10. Michail Bakunin: *The Program of the International Brotherhood*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, p.152.
11. "Thus socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without, and not something that arose within it spontaneously." (translation according to Raya Dunayeskaya: *Marxism and Freedom*. London 1975, p.180) quoted in Lenin's *What is to be Done* (1902) from Karl Kautsky's *Die Revision des Programms der Sozialdemokratie in Oesterreich*. *Neue Zeit*, vol.20, Band I, 1902, p.80.
12. Michael Bakunin: *The Program of the International Brotherhood*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, p.155.
13. Cf. according Gerhard Leibholz: *Strukturprobleme der modernen Demokratie*. (3rd edition) Frankfurt a/M:1974, p.81.
14. Rosa Luxemburg: *Die Organisationsfragen der russischen Sozialdemokratie* (1904), and *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften* (1905), both polemic pamphlets against the mainstream of orthodox Marxism.
15. M.A. Bakunin: *Postanovka revolucionarnoga voprosa*. Geneva 1869, pp. 2-5.



16. Michael Bakunin: *The Program of the International Brotherhood*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 154-155.
17. Maurice Moissonnier: *La Premiere Internationale et l'action de Bakounine a Lyon*. *Prilozi za istoriju socijalizma*. Vol.2 (1965), pp. 372-381.
18. M. Bakunin: *Letter to Albert Richard* (April 1, 1870). In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 178-181.
19. G.D.H. Cole: *A History of Socialist Thought*. Vol.II. *Marxism and Anarchism 1830-1890*. London 1956, pp. 121-122.
20. Michail Bakunin and Albert Richard (December 4, 1968). In: G.P. Maximoff, ed. *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*. New York 1964, pp. 379-380. (A full text of the letter in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Band III. Berlin 1924, p.95.)
21. M. Bakunin: *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State*. In: Sam Dolgoff, ed. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York 1972, pp. 167-168; *God and the State*. In: Ibid, p.233.
22. Vyacheslav Polonski: Mikhail Bakunin u epohi tsetrdesetikh i semdesetikh godina. In: M. Bakunjin: *Ispovijed*. Osijek 1976, pp. 23-24.
23. Hans Mayer: *Autoritaet und Familie in der Theorie des Anarchismus*. In: Max Horheimer, ed. *Studien ueber Autoritaet und Familie*. Paris:Stock, 1936, pp. 824-828.
24. Mikhail Bakunin: *Gosudarstvennost i Anarkhiia*, pp. 92-95.
25. *Ibid*, pp. 60-61, 238-240, 280-293.
26. *Ibid*, p.239 (the citation is according the translation of G.P. Maximoff, *op. cit.* p.284.
27. First by Friedrich Engels in *The Peasant War in Germany*. London 1957.
28. Michel Bakounine: *Gosudarstvennost i Anarkhiia*, Addition "A". In *Archives Bakounine*. Vol.III. Arthur Lehning, ed. Leiden 1967, pp. 169-176.
29. Mikhail Bakunin: *Gosudarstvennost i Anarkhiia*, pp. 72-73.
30. Natalia Pirumova: *Mikhail Bakunin*. Moskva 1966. This book, except for the ideological introduction and conclusion chapters, is actually a plagiarism of the book by Richarda Huch: *Bakunin und die Anarchie*. Berlin 1923.
31. This illusion was shared also by Karl Marx in his correspondence with Vera Zasulich. Cf.: Isaac Deutscher: *Heretics and Renegades*. London 1967, pp. 68-77.
32. P.A. Kropotkin: *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. 8th edition. London 1915, pp. 216-217, 222.
33. For example, young Gramsci: Antonio Gramsci: *Die Revolution gegen das 'KAPITAL'; Die russische Utopie*. In: A. Gramsci: *Philosophie der Praxis*. Ch. Riechers, ed. Frankfurt a/M, 1968, pp. 20-26.
34. Karl Kautsky: *Friedrich Engels*. Berlin 1908, p.5. For details see: Hans Jacoby: *Beitraege zur Soziologie des sozialistischen Idee*. Wiebaden 1973, pp. 15-18.
35. Peter Kropotkin: *Anarchism*. In: Roger N. Baldwin, ed. *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. New York 1927, p.298.
36. *Op. cit.*, pp. 284-285.
37. P.A. Kropotkin: *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, pp. 198-208; *Anarchist Communism*. In: Roger N. Baldwin, ed. *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. New York 1927, p.64.
38. *Erfurter Programm* (1891). In: Wolfgang Abendroth: *Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt a/M 1969, p.95; Karl Kautsky: *Der Entwurf des neuen Parteiprogramms*. *Die Neue Zeit*. Jg. 1890-1891, Band II, S. 749-750; F. Engels: *Anti-Duehring*; Anton Pannekoek, *Umwaelzungen im Zukunftstaat*. In: Cajo Brendel, ed. *Neubestimmung des Marximus*. Berlin (W) 1974, pp. 77-88; V.I. Lenin:



- The Concept of the Program of RCP(b)*. In: *Selected Writings*, vol.13; one of his last works: *Less but Better*. In: *Selected Writings*, vol.14.
39. Errico Malatesta, *Selected Writings*, New York 1970, pp. 257-267.
  40. Peter Kropotkin: *Anarchism*, pp. 286-287.
  41. In Kropotkin's – but not in Bakunin's – it seems to me, that the criticism of Hans Mayer is justified (see note).
  42. Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism*. In: Roger N. Baldwin, ed. *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. New York 1927, p.146.
  43. Peter Kropotkin: *The Commune of Paris*. London 1909. pp. 1-3.
  44. Peter Kropotkin: *The Conquest of Bread*. New and Cheaper Edition. London 1913, pp. 32-46, 77-87.
  45. August Bebel: *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*. 1878. Until 1908, 50 editions in German only.
  46. Karl Kautsky: *Das Erfurter Programm*. In seinem grundsatzlichen Teil erlaeutert. Stuttgart 1892.
  47. Anton Pannekoek: *Umwaelzungen im Zukunftstaat*. In: Cajo Brendel, ed. *Neubestimmung des Marxismus*. Berlin (W) 1974.
  48. Wilhelm Liebknecht: *Zukunftstaatliches*. *Cosmopolis*, 1/1898.
  49. Eduard Bernstein: *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*. Stuttgart 1899. (Third, fourth and the concluding chapters.)
  50. Ramsay MacDonald: *Socialism and Society*. London 1908, pp. 149-150, 191-192.
  51. Peter Kropotkin: *Anarchismus im Russland*. Berlin 1907, p.12.
  52. Peter Kropotkin: *Rossiskaia revolutsia i anarkhizm*. London 1907, pp. 12-14.
  53. *Syndikalismus und Anarchismus*. Berlin 1908, pp. 2-4.
  54. V. Novomirski: *Manifest anarkhistov-komunistov*. Moskva 1917.
  55. Pyotr Arshinov: *Istoria Mahnoskogo dvizhenia 1918-1921*. Berlin 1925.
  56. Pyotr Arshinov: *Anarkhizm i diktatura proletariata*. Berlin 1927; *Novoe v anarkhizmu*. Paris 1929.
  57. Peter Kropotkin: *Letter to the Workers of Western Europe: What to Do?* In: Roger N. Baldwin, ed. *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. New York 1927, p. 146.
  58. Alexander Berkman: *The ABC of Anarchism*. London 1945, pp. 42-57.
  59. Voline (V.M. Eichenbaum): *The Unknown Revolution*. New York, 1974, pp. 175-176, 191-197.
  60. Rudolf de Jong: *Entstehung und Entwicklung des Anarchismus*. In: *Marxismus & Anarchismus*. Berlin (West) 1975, pp. 65-66.
  61. Colin Ward: *Anarchy in Action*. New Edition. London 1985.
  62. Wolfgang Dressen: *Antiautoritaeres Lager und Anarchismus*. Berlin 1968, pp. 22-23.
  63. Christian Cornelissen: *Ueber die Evolution des Anarchismus*. *Archiv fuer Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*. Vol.26, No.2 (1908); Erwin Oberlaender: *Einleitung*. In: E. Oberlaender, ed. *Der Anarchismus*. Dokumente der Weltrevolution. Vol.2. Olten 1972, pp. 36-39.
  64. Bakunin also imagined the relationship between the International Workingmen's Association and the Alliance to be of this order. Bakunin supported this position both before and after the break up within the First International.
  65. Max Nettlau: *Anarchisten und Sozialrevolutionaere*. Berlin 1931, pp. 226-228.
  66. Georg Stieklow: *Bakunistische Internationale nach dem Haager Kongress*. Stuttgart 1914, p.27.



*Max Nettlau***Peter Kropotkin at Work**

Kropotkin's personality and ideas were to such an extent before comrades and the public at large, until 1914 at least, that little remains to be said at this hour of his death, when one feels disinclined to compile hosts of facts and figures, to dissect ideas, or to record small traits and anecdotes. Again, that Revolution, let loose in 1914 and since being spelled with an R of ever-growing proportions, is still so unsettled that we can hardly calculate the different forces at work and foresee their final course; so, with many factors still hidden, at least to our observation, we cannot rightly judge at this moment what influence Kropotkin's life-work and ideas had, and maintain, on all that happened and on the much greater bulk of all that is preparing. Authority, which he fought all his life, seems to be victorious everywhere, from Imperialism to Bolshevism; and yet, to most thinking people, these are hollow victories, the last and most hideous manifestations of Authority, digging its own grave by creating at last an immense desire for real freedom and good fellowship, and leading inevitably up to the time when all the seeds scattered by Kropotkin and so many other Anarchists will bear fruit. When in some countries the present system was discredited and broke down, it was probably inevitable that large parties and masses, eager for power and materially dissatisfied and hungry, should first grasp the reins of power and adopt rough authoritarian measures. Freedom's turn comes next, and the question as to what extent coming events will be more directly inspired by freedom than those since 1917 have been, is the great problem before us. We are in the very midst of this development, and a more definite estimate of Kropotkin's work and its lasting influence must be postponed.

It is sufficient to say that during his life of activity, from the sixties until 1914, he did whatever man could do, and that few lives are so teeming with continuous work, work for science and the elaboration of ideas, work for propaganda and the spreading of ideas, all this



accompanied by hard work for a modest livelihood for himself and family. It is in this respect, as a hard-working man of rare and immense activity, that I will consider Kropotkin just now.

He would not have been averse to a life a little more easy, but circumstances chained him to his work for between fifty and sixty years, and, once at work, he worked away with great intensity. I believe that his ideas were formed by a slow process of gathering materials and observations with scientific ardour, and then basing conclusions upon them. Once these conclusions were formed, be it in the 1860s or thirty years later, they got hold of him to an incredible degree, and seemed unalterable throughout his life. Henceforth he would be untiring to seek confirmation of these ideas, but he would never seem to be inclined or to find time to re-examine them and to revise their foundation. To me, at least, this rigid adherence to all he had ever observed, be it in the early 1860s, and which his memory retained wonderfully, appeared somewhat strange, and leading to isolation in the face of the ever-progressing advance of science. I should have wished to see his ideas thrown into the crucible of general scientific discussion to a much greater degree than they were, modified by criticism, augmented by the research of many others, and then they might be before us now in a more expanded, less personal form. But I recognise that many reasons prevented this, and fixed Kropotkin, if I may say so, on the borderline between scientist and prophet. Scientists are plentiful and prophets also, but men nourished by true science and transforming it by themselves and spreading it like prophets are very scarce, and Kropotkin's position was in some respects unique.

The brilliant progress of natural science after Darwin's great work was published in the late 1850s, and the immense undeveloped resources of Russia and Siberia, which Kropotkin learnt to appreciate by his travels, stimulated his interest for natural science, and he became an active worker upon this immense field, which even in autocratic Russia was relatively undisturbed. But here his natural unselfishness interfered, and when he saw the downtrodden state of the people, to whom the natural riches and mineral wealth of Russia, and all the researches of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer meant absolutely nothing, he threw up the scientific career and cast in his lot with those who prepared the Russian Revolution.

Thus, after his travels and studies in the 1860s and much manual work, so to speak, in this domain, translations and the like, to earn a living, he applied the same intensity of work to revolutionary



purposes, the organisation of secret propagandist travels, meetings, lectures and printing, and to secret lectures of his own in the guise of a working man. His interest was always a thorough one, he went to the bottom of things and did the real work, small or large, as required, from a revolutionary lecture to drawing up a plan for the reorganisation of the movement all over Russia.

He first travelled abroad in 1871-72, and unfailingly found his way to the small Anarchist sections of the International in the Swiss Jura, which fascinated him, and which he always remembered and loved. After a period of intense activity in Russia, his arrest, imprisonment and escape, and a lingering time in London, then barren of revolutionists, he returned to the Swiss Jura, and then, from the latter part of 1876 onward, for some years he becomes the very soul of the Anarchist International.

That movement was then declining as far as outside organisation went, the forms of international federation, however unpretending and elastic they were since the reorganisation at St. Imier in September 1872, being considered superfluous altogether by the local propagandists. Still some of the earlier propagandists, those initiated in Bakunin's intimate circle, called the 'Alliance', kept together, corresponded or met; and Kropotkin soon became one of them, the most fervid and active of the time, always encouraging those whom years of propaganda in a period of general reaction had somewhat tired. I happen to know, by communications from James Guillaume, quantities of internationalist letters then addressed to Kropotkin and showing his relations, efforts, and the state of the movement, as seen from the innermost in the countries where the Anarchist International or sections of it still existed, Italy excepted, where the movement was always so strong and in good care that his help was less needed. These letters, for example, illustrate the Spanish movement of that period – when the International had to be an underground organisation for years – and circumstances even led to a journey by Kropotkin to Spain, to arrange some internationalist matters, a journey which impressed him greatly with the revolutionary earnestness of the Spanish workers. Or he would compile, for certain German Anarchist workers in Switzerland, the first German Anarchist programme ever circulated, and, with P. Brousse, of Montpellier, give great help to the first German Anarchist paper, then published at Berne, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, which, like numbers of other Anarchist publications of the time, he had the excellent idea to send to the British Museum, where this phase of the movement can be studied with exceptional facility.



At another time, again, he would edit the *Jurassian Bulletin* (in French), in James Guillaume's absence. There he wrote on the Russo-Turkish war and struck that note of Slavonic nationalism which always inspired him since his military youth, or earlier, if possible, and which, when it burst out again during the Russo-Japanese and the Balkan Allies' wars and in 1914, surprised none of those who knew the unalterable character of his impressions and conclusions, if they were ever so old.

This internationalist activity led him to Belgium, the Congresses held at Verviers and at Ghent, whence he had to depart to Paris, where the earliest foundations of present-day Anarchism were then laid. He made his way back to Switzerland, where the *Révolté* was founded, early in 1879; and this paper, to which Kropotkin from the first gave his fullest attention and immense care, became rapidly the international organ of ascending Anarchism, whilst in France flourishing movements sprung up, mainly in Paris and the Rhone district, at Lyons, etc. These were the years of Kropotkin's greatest activity, when besides editing the *Révolté* and writing that connected series of articles which was later edited by Reclus as *Words of a Rebel*, he extended his personal activity and relations to the south-west of France, the Lyons region, and at the same time found congenial scientific work in helping Elisée Reclus, at Clarens, on the lake of Geneva, with the enormous annual volumes of his geography, besides enjoying the closest comradeship of this man of the broadest culture and the finest Anarchist ideas.

A time will come when some keen reasoner and psychologist will compare the Anarchism of Kropotkin and that of Reclus, who closely co-operated, who were intimate friends, and yet who seem, to me at least, to possess great differences as well as remarkable affinities. To me Kropotkin's Anarchism seems harder, less tolerant, more disposed to be practical; that of Reclus seems to be wider, wonderfully tolerant, uncompromising as well, based on a more humanitarian basis. There is room for both and more, and if Kropotkin's Anarchism is more of his time and parts of it may vanish with himself, that of Reclus seems more lasting to me; the time to recognise it fully has not yet arrived, but is sure to come.

In 1881 Kropotkin participated in the London International Revolutionary Congress, which was a welcome pretext to the Swiss authorities to make his residence in Geneva and Clarens impossible, just as some time later the vigorous growth of the movement in the Lyons region was used by the French authorities to imprison and try



the principal propagandists, Kropotkin also, at Lyons (1883), which led to their imprisonment at Clairvaux from then to the beginning of 1886, when an amnesty liberated them all, also Louise Michel and others. After a short time at Paris, where he would not have been allowed to stay, he came to England and settled in Harrow.

He had passed some lengthy and rather tedious periods in London since 1876, when the Socialist movement amounted to nothing, or was just beginning, as in 1881. Unfortunately the years 1884 and 1885, when the anti-parliamentarian part of the Social Democratic Federation (comprising full-grown Anarchists like Joseph Lane and Sam Mainwaring, authoritarian revolutionists like Andreas Scheu, William Morris and his friends, and, curiously enough, from personal reasons rather, certain Marxists, the Avelings, Bax, etc.), seceded and founded the Socialist League in 1884—these years were unknown to Kropotkin, and when he came to London in 1886 he must have seen these events through the eyes of his early personal friend, H.M. Hyndman, and those of some English Anarchists outside the Socialist League, who were also of Social Democratic origin; besides the *apparent* influence of the Marxists, Marx's daughter, upon the Socialist League—as an eye-witness of these matters since the end of 1885 I think I can say, rightly, *apparent*—may have deterred the Jurassian internationalist, who had all the struggle of Marx against Bakunin at his fingers' ends.

It is regrettable that he seems to have made no closer examination of the real situation, and decided upon having nothing to do with the Socialist League, and founded an independent group, which began by using H. Seymour's *Anarchist*, an outspoken Individualist Anarchist paper, as their organ, a scheme of co-operation which collapsed within a few months. After this there was no paper until, in October, 1886, *FREEDOM* began to be published.

The Socialist League at that time contained the flower of English revolutionary Socialism, mainly the popular revolutionists with strong Anarchist leanings, who had restarted the English movement about 1880—one of them, Joseph Lane, wrote the first English Anarchist pamphlet, *An Anti-statist Communist Manifesto*, issued in 1887—and some very good people who felt attracted by William Morris's thoroughgoing Socialism of that period. If Kropotkin had joined them at that time he would have had the most friendly reception and the fullest opportunities for Anarchist propaganda; many comrades who were then at their best could have been won. Instead of this they were apt to get the impression that Kropotkin and, still more, the recent



converts to Anarchism coming from the S.D.F. cared little for them, and so they went their own way, some finding by themselves the road to Anarchism, some, however, losing themselves in doubt and uncertainty. I have always felt that a splendid opportunity was lost here.

However, we must be satisfied with what Kropotkin chose himself to do, and he never stinted his help to the small group which got to be called the Freedom Group and their paper. His articles for many years were not signed, and none but those who did the immediate editing, like Mrs. C.M. Wilson and our late comrade A. Marsh, or the compositors of the paper, knew what immense care Kropotkin gave to it; having seen some of his letters to A. Marsh, covering a small period only, I can testify to it. A similar help he gave for many years to the *Révolté*, of Paris, which succeeded the Geneva paper; here Jean Grave is still alive to tell of it.

The earliest volumes of FREEDOM contain, as he well remembered, an entire book by him, complete, or nearly complete, namely, a series of articles (unsigned) which follow a given plan, as those preceding, forming *The Words of a Rebel*, and those following, *The Conquest of Bread*, also did. This work would range between both books, and is adapted to English social and political institutions. Thus a very popular introduction to Anarchism may yet be unearthed from the old file of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately the late editor of the *Nineteenth Century*, Mr. Knowles, gave him free scope to write articles on Russia, on Anarchism ('The Scientific Basis of Anarchy,' February, 1887; 'The Coming Anarchy,' August 1887); and further room to work out in detail the economic basis of his ideas; hence: 'The Breakdown of our Industrial System' (April, 1888), 'The Coming Reign of Plenty,' 'The Industrial Village of the Future,' 'Brain Work and Manual Work,' and 'The Small Industries of Britain' (August, 1900), articles which formed the book, *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, issued in 1901. He also published the 'Mutual Aid' series (September, 1890, to June, 1896), followed by articles like 'The Theory of Evolution and Mutual Aid' (January, 1910), 'The Direct Action of Environment on Plants' (July, 1910), 'The Response of Animals to their Environment' and 'Inheritance of Acquired Characters' (March 1912). Meanwhile he had begun an

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1. The 'entire book' was finally published in 1988 under the title *Act for Yourself: Articles from Freedom 1886-1907* by Peter Kropotkin, edited by Nicolas Walter and Heiner Becker (Freedom Press, £2.50), as a volume in the Freedom Press Centenary Series.



ethical series: 'The Ethical Needs of the Present Day' (August, 1904), 'The Morality of Nature' (March, 1905), which was then, I think, discontinued, as the coming Russian revolutionary change of 1905 absorbed his time and effort. His ethical studies continued, but the growing strain upon his time and diminished health interrupted their serial publication, and he is said to have been working at this work on Ethics at Dmitriev up to the last. The *Nineteenth Century* articles – I omit others on Finland or French Prisons or the French Revolution, etc. – gave him greater work than anything he wrote, especially the articles called 'Recent Science' (about seventeen long articles from 1892 to 1901, dealing with scientific progress in all domains and requiring the most painstaking preparation).

Besides this he used to lecture, touring in the provinces and in Scotland, mostly dealing with Russian subjects; and he spoke for more than twenty years at all the Commune and Chicago Martyrs meetings, and in later years always sent letters.

The Freedom Group came to understand their isolation and in 1888 lectures began to be given, of which I remember some by Kropotkin at the Socialist League offices in Farringdon Road. But even then no further co-operation ensued, and it was not until the Commonweal Group had been broken up by persecutions in 1894, and FREEDOM also was voluntarily interrupted for some months in 1894-95, that the rest of the Commonweal Group and the Freedom Group amalgamated and FREEDOM was resuscitated in May, 1895, to be published without a break from that time until to-day.

Somehow none of these events, the stirring times of the early 1890s, brought Kropotkin into a contact with the English movement so close as that which existed – as I heard from descriptions – between himself and the movement in the Jura townships and at Geneva. The literary work for his living (auxiliary geographical work, etc.), and his health, impaired by prison life, also the many calls on his literary help, correspondence, etc., required a certain retirement, besides periods of strained library work; and he always dwelt at a considerable distance from the centre, at Harrow, Acton, Bromley (Kent), Muswell Hill, and finally, when his health demanded it, at Brighton, and only passed an odd week or so in London now and then for library researches. As he gave all his time to work, study, correspondence, and visitors, he could not possibly have done more; and if his contact with the London movement had been more frequent other parts of his work which appeal to a larger public must have been curtailed.

He had so very many things in hand which led to studies, which,



like all serious studies, never come to an end. Thus he watched the whole range of organic life for proofs of mutual aid as against the struggle for life, and was seldom so delighted as when, at last, he discovered an account of some social tigers. To this he added by and by the burden of ethical research, where so much literature antagonistic to his ideas still required to be examined preliminarily.

Then his American journey produced the invitation of the *Atlantic Monthly* to write his *Memoirs*, a task the first part of which revived all his early Russian memories and, in general, led him back to ever so many recollections of which he did not speak in the *Memoirs*. Knowing my historical and bibliographical interest—which he always very kindly seconded—he told me in those years many additions to the *Memoirs* which I took care to record. This revival of his youth also led to those American lectures on Russian literature, the subject of another book in 1905.

Meanwhile the Russian Revolution of 1905 was preparing, and this led him to resume his studies on the French Revolution of 1789 to 1794, a subject which he had in his mind when he first came to Paris, in 1877, devoting then what time he could to historical research. The studies of a Russian historian and F. Rocquain's book on the forerunners of the Revolution guided these researches, and 'The Spirit of Revolt', 1882 (in the *Révolte*), is their first outcome, the Nineteenth Century article of 1889 another one; articles in the *Temps Nouveaux* are a subsequent enlargement, until at last – to the editor's dismay, owing to the continual additions and corrections – the big French book of 749 pages (1909) gave the final results.

This re-examination of the French Revolution in its minute details, the contemporary Russian Revolution of 1905 and its sequel during the years following – the most cruel features of these years Kropotkin exposed in 'The Terror in Russia' (July, 1909) – the renewed contact with Russia by the early recollections mentioned, and by a great number of Russian visitors since about 1905, also by co-operation with a Russian Anarchist group (issuing a small Russian paper in London, 1906-07); a certain social contact also with Russian politicians, journalists, artists of various shades of opinion, all telling him about Russia – all worked together to shape Kropotkin's mentality during the years preceding the war. The Japanese War had rekindled his political feelings; his journeys to France (Brittany and Paris), to Southern Switzerland (Locarno), and the Italian Riviera (Rapallo) – imperiously required by his health – brought him in contact with different milieus, and a sort of interest in political gossip arose, which



old personal friends like H.M. Hyndman certainly did not quell, and which astonished those who believed when they first met him, that they would be face to face with an anti-militarist, anti-patriotic internationalist. The opposite was almost the case. At least the defence of France, the defence of Russia, were more and more of paramount interest to him; and when Elisée Reclus was dead, when Tolstoy died, and he alone of the world-wide known libertarian humanitarians remained, he did not raise his voice in the years of general war preparations and of actual wars, ever since 1911, in Tripoli and in the Balkans. Malatesta spoke out about the 'Tripolitan brigandage' of 1911; Kropotkin was silent when the Balkan War broke out in 1912, and he drove me from one corner of the room to the other by a rhetorical bayonet charge when he saw I was not exulting over the victories of the Balkan Allies. But enough of this, which since 1914 is a matter of general knowledge. To me it is merely the manifestation of a feeling which had not left him for a single moment since his youth, childhood, or infancy, and which he never concealed when opportunities arose, as in 1876, 1904, 1912, and from 1914 onward.

To complete the rough list of his principal objects of study, there was intensive agriculture, permitting decentralisation and local self-dependence. From Jersey and Mr. Rowntree's efforts of home colonisation his interest ranged to Canada, where he travelled with the British Association, to French gardening, and so on.

When he wrote *Modern Science and Anarchism* and an enlarged French edition (1913), also the article on 'Anarchism' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (supplement), he was led to examine the early Anarchist writers, and was greatly struck with many unsuspected advanced ideas he found there; also Fourier greatly interested him. He was only sorry on all such occasions that his time was so much taken up, and so indeed it was to an ever increasing degree, with the revision of translations, correspondence, and visitors. His working power was seriously diminished, and when he overstepped the medical restrictions he was sure to overwork himself, to be laid up for weeks, and to be forbidden all work. During the last few years before 1914 he felt very much the necessity of always working to keep his home going, and he would have dearly enjoyed some real rest, which for him would have meant the reading and even the collecting of books (for he was a book lover, too, and enjoyed to get hold of scarce revolutionary editions), artistic pleasures, and listening to interesting news, with some peeps behind the curtains of politics among them. But such



leisure he was never to enjoy; some cares, impaired working power, and very precarious health never gave him a respite. Yet he was cheerful and gay and loved to joke and to laugh, but he was also the next moment dreadfully hard and earnest, and, above all, he was unalterable in his adherence to the different strings of ideas which he had formulated. But why insist upon these weaknesses which, after all, no doubt had their advantages as well, and contributed to the composition of the unique personality he was.

His attitude in 1914 did not surprise me; he *could* not have acted otherwise; and those who knew him well could have foretold every word he would say. Without wishing to introduce any debatable subject I think I may be allowed to say that in my opinion, and that of well-informed German comrades (also G. Landauer, the victim of Munich in 1919), he was considerably deficient in information about Germany, from Socialism to politics and the national character in general. His sources were rather second-hand or spurious, and he would not have based a scientific opinion upon them; indeed, when he wrote on science, he consulted and acknowledged German sources with interest and accuracy.

I can thus feel and understand his life from 1914 to 1917, also his immense delight at the Russian Revolution of March, 1917, and the hope with which he returned to Russia in Kerensky's time. Some months later, however, his life must have become a tragedy, and must have been this to the very end. Tolstoy spoke up to the Tsar in 1908: 'I can no longer be silent; I must speak' – Kropotkin's voice to Lenin was not heard, or only in a few letters printed abroad; but he may have thought that all his friends would interpret his silence, like that of Spies when he met his death at Chicago in 1887: 'There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are strangling to-day' – the silence of Kropotkin covers a tragedy before which to us his weaker sides disappear, and his cheerful, indefatigable work for freedom, science, and humanity alone remains.

*Freedom*, February, 1921



## *Errico Malatesta*

### **Anarchists have Forgotten their Principles**

At the risk of passing as a simpleton, I confess that I would never have believed it possible that Socialists – even Social Democrats – would applaud and voluntarily take part, either on the side of the Germans or on that of the Allies, in a war like the one that is at present devastating Europe. But what is there to say when the same is done by Anarchists – not numerous, it is true, but having amongst them comrades whom we love and respect most?

It is said that the present situation shows the bankruptcy of “our formulas” – i.e. of our principles – and that it will be necessary to revise them.

Generally speaking, every formula must be revised whenever it shows itself insufficient when coming into contact with fact; but it is not the case today, when the bankruptcy is not derived from the shortcoming of our formulas, but from the fact that these have been forgotten and betrayed.

Let us return to our principles.

I am not a ‘pacifist’. I fight, as we all do, for the triumph of peace and of fraternity amongst all human beings; but I know that a desire not to fight can only be fulfilled when neither side wants to, and that so long as men will be found who want to violate the liberties of others, it is incumbent on these others to defend themselves if they do not wish to be eternally beaten; and I also know that to attack is often the best, or the only, effective means of defending oneself. Besides, I think that the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate self-defence, and have always the right to attack the oppressors. I admit, therefore, that there are wars that are necessary, holy wars: and these are wars of liberation, such as are generally ‘civil wars’ – i.e. revolutions.

But what has the present war in common with human emancipation, which is our cause?

Today we hear Socialists speak, just like any bourgeois, of ‘France’, or ‘Germany’, and of other political and national agglomerations – results of historical struggles – as of homogeneous ethnographic



units, each having its proper interests, aspirations, and mission, in opposition to the interests, aspirations, and mission of rival units. This may be true relatively, so long as the oppressed, and chiefly the workers, have no self-consciousness, fail to recognise the injustice of their inferior position, and make themselves the docile tools of the oppressors. There is, then, the dominating class only that counts; and this class, owing to its desire to conserve and to enlarge its power, even its prejudices and its own ideas, may find it convenient to excite racial ambitions and hatred, and send its nation, its flock, against 'foreign' countries, with a view to releasing them from their present oppressors, and submitting them to its own political and economical domination.

But the mission of those who, like us, wish the end of all oppression and of all exploitation of man by man, is to awaken a consciousness of the antagonism of interests between dominators and dominated, between exploiters and workers, and to develop the class struggle inside each country, and the solidarity among all workers across the frontiers, as against any prejudice and any passion of either race or nationality.

And this we have always done. We have always preached that the workers of all countries are brothers, and the enemy – the 'foreigner' – is the exploiter, whether born near us or in a far-off country, whether speaking the same language or any other. We have always chosen our friends, our companions-in-arms, as well as our enemies, because of the ideas they profess and of the position they occupy in the social struggle, and never for reasons of race or nationality. We have always fought against patriotism, which is a survival of the past, and serves well the interests of the oppressors; and we were proud of being internationalists, not only in words, but by the deep feelings of our souls.

And now that the most atrocious consequences of capitalist and State domination should indicate, even to the blind, that we were in the right, most of the Socialists and many Anarchists in the belligerent countries associate themselves with the Governments and the bourgeoisie of their respective countries, forgetting Socialism, the class struggle, international fraternity, and the rest.

What a downfall!

It is possible that present events may have shown that national feelings are more alive, while feelings of international brotherhood are less rooted, than we thought; but this should be one more reason for intensifying, not abandoning, our anti-patriotic propaganda. These events also show that in France, for example, religious sentiment is stronger, and the priests have a greater influence than we imagined. Is this a reason for our conversion to Roman Catholicism?



I understand that circumstances may arise owing to which the help of all is necessary for the general well-being: such as an epidemic, an earthquake, an invasion of barbarians, who kill and destroy all that comes under their hands. In such a case the class struggle, the differences of social standing must be forgotten, and common cause must be made against the common danger; but on the condition that these differences are forgotten on both sides. If any one is in prison during an earthquake, and there is a danger of his being crushed to death, it is our duty to save everybody, even the gaolers – on condition that the gaolers begin by opening the prison doors. But if the gaolers take all precautions for the safe custody of the prisoners during and after the catastrophe, it is then the duty of the prisoners towards themselves as well as towards their comrades in captivity to leave the gaolers to their troubles, and profit by the occasion to save themselves.

If, when foreign soldiers invade the *sacred soil of the Fatherland*, the privileged class were to renounce their privileges, and would act so that the 'Fatherland' really became the common property of all the inhabitants, it would then be right that all should fight against the invaders. But if kings wish to remain kings, and the landlords wish to take care of *their* lands and of *their* houses, and the merchants wish to take care of *their* goods, and even sell them at a higher price, then the workers, the Socialists and Anarchists, should leave them to their own devices, while being themselves on the look-out for an opportunity to get rid of the oppressors inside the country, as well as of those coming from outside.

In all circumstances, it is the duty of the Socialists, and especially of the Anarchists, to do everything that can weaken the State and the capitalist class, and to take as the only guide to their conduct the interests of Socialism; or, if they are materially powerless to act efficaciously for their own cause, at least to refuse any voluntary help to the cause of the enemy, and stand aside to save at least their principles – which means to save the future.

All I have just said is theory, and perhaps it is accepted, in theory, by most of those who, in practice, do just the reverse. How, then, could it be applied to the present situation? What should we do, what should we wish, in the interests of our cause?

It is said, on this side of the Rhine, that the victory of the Allies would be the end of militarism, the triumph of civilisation, international justice, etc. The same is said on the other side of the frontier about a German victory.



Personally, judging at their true value the 'mad dog' of Berlin and the 'old hangman' of Vienna, I have no greater confidence in the bloody Tsar, nor in the English diplomatists who oppress India, who betrayed Persia, who crushed the Boer Republics; nor in the French bourgeoisie, who massacred the natives of Morocco; nor in those of Belgium, who have allowed the Congo atrocities and have largely profited by them – and I only recall some of their misdeeds, taken at random, not mention what all Governments and all capitalist classes do against the workers and the rebels in their own countries.

In my opinion, the victory of Germany would certainly mean the triumph of militarism and of reaction; but the triumph of the Allies would mean a Russo-English (i.e. a knouto-capitalist) domination in Europe and in Asia, conscription and the development of the militarist spirit in England, and a Clerical and perhaps Monarchist reaction in France.

Besides, in my opinion, it is most probable that there will be no definite victory on either side. After a long war, an enormous loss of life and wealth, both sides being exhausted, some kind of peace will be patched up, leaving all questions open, thus preparing for a new war more murderous than the present.

The only hope is revolution; and as I think that it is from vanquished Germany that in all probability, owing to the present state of things, the revolution would break out, it is for this reason – and for this reason only – that I wish the defeat of Germany.

I may, of course, be mistaken in appreciating the true position. But what seems to me elementary and fundamental for all Socialists (Anarchist, or others) is that it is necessary to keep outside every kind of compromise with the Governments and the governing classes, so as to be able to profit by any opportunity that may present itself, and, in any case, to be able to restart and continue our revolutionary preparations and propaganda.

*Freedom*, November 1914

## Pro-Government Anarchists

A manifesto has just appeared, signed by Kropotkin, Grave, Malato, and a dozen other old comrades, in which, echoing the supporters of the Entente Governments who are demanding a fight to a finish and



the crushing of Germany, they take their stand against any idea of 'premature peace'.

The capitalist Press publishes, with natural satisfaction, extracts from the manifesto, and announces it as the work of 'leaders of the International Anarchist Movement'.

Anarchists, almost all of whom have remained faithful to their convictions, owe it to themselves to protest against this attempt to implicate Anarchism in the continuance of a ferocious slaughter that has never held promise of any benefit to the cause of Justice and Liberty, and which now shows itself to be absolutely barren and resultless even from the standpoint of the rulers on either side.

The good faith and good intentions of those who have signed the manifesto are beyond all question. But, however painful it may be to disagree with old friends who have rendered so many services to that which in the past was our common cause, one cannot – having regard to sincerity, and in the interest of our movement for emancipation – fail to dissociate oneself from comrades who consider themselves able to reconcile Anarchist ideas and co-operation with the Governments and capitalist classes of certain countries in their strife against the capitalists and Governments of certain other countries.

During the present war we have seen Republicans placing themselves at the service of kings, Socialists making common cause with the ruling class, Labourists serving the interests of capitalists; but in reality all these people are, in varying degrees, Conservatives – believers in the mission of the State, and their hesitation can be understood when the only remedy lay in the destruction of every Governmental chain and the unloosing of the Social Revolution. But such hesitation is incomprehensible in the case of Anarchists.

We hold that the State is incapable of good. In the field of international as well as of individual relations it can only combat aggression by making itself the aggressor; it can only hinder crime by organising and committing still greater crime.

Even on the supposition – which is far from being the truth – that Germany alone was responsible for the present war, it is proved that, as long as governmental methods are adhered to, Germany can only resisted by suppressing all liberty and reviving the power of all the forces of reaction. Except the popular Revolution, there is no other way of resisting the menace of a disciplined Army but to try and have a stronger and more disciplined Army; so that the sternest anti-militarists, if they are not Anarchists, and if they are afraid of the destruction of the State, are inevitably led to become ardent militarists.



In fact, in the problematical hope of crushing Prussian Militarism, they have renounced all the spirit and all the traditions of Liberty; they have Prussianised England and France; they have submitted themselves to Tsarism; they have restored the prestige of the tottering throne of Italy.

Can Anarchists accept this state of things for a single moment without renouncing all right to call themselves Anarchists? To me, even foreign domination suffered by force and leading to revolt, is preferable to domestic oppression meekly, almost gratefully, accepted, in the belief that by this means we are preserved from a greater evil.

It is useless to say that this is a question of an exceptional time, and that after having contributed to the victory of the Entente in 'this war', we shall return, each into his own camp, to the struggle for his own ideal.

If it is necessary today to work in harmony with the Government and the capitalist to defend ourselves against 'the German menace', it will be necessary afterwards, as well as during the war.

However great may be the defeat of the German Army – if it is true that it will be defeated – it will never be possible to prevent the German patriots thinking of, and preparing for, revenge; and the patriots of the other countries, very reasonably from their own point of view, will want to hold themselves in readiness so that they may not again be taken unawares. This means that Prussian Militarism will become a permanent and regular institution in all countries.

What will then be said by the self-styled Anarchist who today desire the victory of one of the warring alliances? Will they go on calling themselves anti-militarists and preaching disarmament, refusal to do military service, and sabotage against National Defence, only to become, at the first threat of war, recruiting-sergeants for the Governments that they have attempted to disarm and paralyse?

It will be said that these things will come to an end when the German people have rid themselves of their tyrants and ceased to be a menace to Europe by destroying militarism in their own country. But, if that is the case, the Germans who think, and rightly so, that English and French domination (to say nothing of Tsarist Russia) would be no more delightful to the Germans than German domination to the French and English, will desire first to wait for the Russians and the others to destroy their own militarism, and will meanwhile continue to increase their own country's Army.

And then, how long will the Revolution be delayed? How long Anarchy? Must we always wait for the others to begin?



The line of conduct for Anarchists is clearly marked out by the very logic of their aspirations.

The war ought to have been prevented by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by making the Government afraid of the Revolution. Either the strength or the skill necessary for this has been lacking.

Peace ought to be imposed by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by threatening to do so. To the present time, the strength or the skill is wanting.

Well! there is only remedy: to do better in future. More than ever we must avoid compromise; deepen the chasm between capitalists and wage-slaves, between rulers and ruled; preach expropriation of private property and the destruction of States as the only means of guaranteeing fraternity between the peoples and Justice and Liberty for all; and we must prepare to accomplish these things.

Meanwhile it seems to me that it is criminal to do anything that tends to prolong the war, that slaughters men, destroys wealth, and hinders all resumption of the struggle for emancipation. It appears to me that preaching 'war to the end' is really playing the game of the German rulers, who are deceiving their subjects and inflaming their ardour for fighting by persuading them that their opponents desire to crush and enslave the German people.

Today, as ever, let this be our slogan: Down with Capitalists and Governments, all Capitalists and all Governments!

Long live the peoples, all the peoples!

*Freedom*, April 1916

## **Peter Kropotkin – Recollections and criticisms of an old friend**

This essay was first published in the Italian language review *Studi Sociali* (Montevideo on April 15, 1931). The first English translation is included in the Freedom Press volume *Malatesta – Life & Ideas*.

Peter Kropotkin is without doubt one of those who have contributed perhaps most – perhaps more even than Bakunin and Elisée Reclus – to the elaboration and propagation of anarchist ideas. And he has



therefore well deserved the recognition and the admiration that all anarchists feel for him.

But in homage to the truth and in the greater interest of the cause, one must recognise that his activity has not all been wholly beneficial. It was not his fault; on the contrary, it was the very eminence of his qualities which gave rise to the ills I am proposing to discuss.

Naturally, Kropotkin being a mortal among mortals could not always avoid error and embrace the whole truth. One should have therefore profited by his invaluable contribution and continued the search which would lead to further advances. But his literary talents, the importance and volume of his output, his indefatigable activity, the prestige that came to him from his reputation as a great scientist, the fact that he had given up a highly privileged position to defend, at the cost of suffering and danger, the popular cause, and furthermore the fascination of his personality which held the attention of those who had the good fortune to meet him, all made him acquire a notoriety and an influence such that he appeared, and to a great extent he really was, the recognised master for most anarchists.

As a result of which, criticism was discouraged and the development of the anarchist idea was arrested. For many years, in spite of the iconoclastic and progressive spirit of anarchists, most of them so far as theory and propaganda were concerned, did no more than study and quote Kropotkin. To express oneself other than the way he did was considered by many comrades almost as heresy.

It would therefore be opportune to subject Kropotkin's teachings to close and critical analysis in order to separate that which is ever real and alive from that which more recent thought and experience will have shown to be mistaken. A matter which would concern not only Kropotkin, for the errors that one can blame him for having committed were already being professed by anarchists before Kropotkin acquired his eminent place in the movement: he confirmed them and made them last by adding the weight of his talent and his prestige; but all us old militants, or almost all of us, have our share of responsibility.

In writing now about Kropotkin I do not intend to examine his teachings. I only wish to record a few impressions and recollections, which may I believe, serve to make better known his moral and intellectual stature as well as understanding more clearly his qualities and his faults.

But first of all I will say a few words which come from the heart because I cannot think of Kropotkin without being moved by the



recollection of his immense goodness. I remember what he did in Geneva in the winter of 1879 to help a group of Italian refugees in dire straits, among them myself; I remember the small attentions, I would call maternal, which he bestowed on me when one night in London having been the victim of an accident I went and knocked on his door; I recall the innumerable kind actions towards all sorts of people; I remember the cordial atmosphere with which he was surrounded. Because he was a really good person, of that goodness which is almost unconscious and needs to relieve all suffering and be surrounded by smiles and happiness. One would have in fact said that he was good without knowing it; in any case he didn't like one saying so, and he was offended when I wrote in an article on the occasion of his 70th birthday that his goodness was the first of his qualities. He would rather boast of his energy and courage – perhaps because these latter qualities had been developed in, and for, the struggle, whereas goodness was the spontaneous expression of his intimate nature.

I had the honour and good fortune of being for many years linked to Kropotkin by the warmest friendship.

We loved each other because we were inspired by the same passion, by the same hopes ... and also by the same illusions.

Both of us were optimistic by temperament (I believe nevertheless that Kropotkin's optimism surpassed mine by a long chalk and possibly sprung from a different source) and we saw things with rose tinted spectacles – alas! everything was too rosy – we then hoped, and it is more than fifty years ago, in a revolution to be made in the immediate future which was to have ushered in our ideal society. During these long years there were certainly periods of doubt and discouragement. I remember Kropotkin once telling me: "My dear Errico, I fear we are alone, you and I, in believing a revolution to be near at hand". But they were passing moods; very soon confidence returned; we explained away the existing difficulties and the scepticism of the comrades and went on working and hoping.

Nevertheless it must not be imagined that on all questions we shared the same views. On the contrary, on many fundamentals we were far from being in agreement, and almost every time we met we would have noisy and heated discussions; but as Kropotkin always felt sure that right was on his side, and could not calmly suffer to be contradicted, and I, on the other hand, had great respect for his erudition and deep concern for his uncertain health, these discussions always ended by changing the subject to avoid undue excitement.



But this did not in any way harm the intimacy of our relationship, because we loved each other and because we collaborated for sentimental rather than intellectual reasons. Whatever may have been our differences of interpretation of the facts, or the arguments by which we justified our actions, in practice we wanted the same things and were motivated by the same intense feeling for freedom, justice and the well-being of all mankind. We could therefore get on together.

And in fact there was never serious disagreement between us until that day in 1914 when we were faced with a question of practical conduct of capital importance to both of us: that of the attitude to be adopted by anarchists to the [First World] War. On that occasion Kropotkin's old preferences for all that which is Russian and French were reawakened and exacerbated in him, and he declared himself an enthusiastic supporter of the *Entente*. He seemed to forget that he was an Internationalist, a socialist and an anarchist; he forgot what he himself had written only a short time before about the war that the Capitalists were preparing, and began expressing admiration for the worst Allied statesmen and Generals, and at the same time treated as cowards the anarchists who refused to join the *Union Sacrée*, regretting that his age and his poor health prevented him from taking up a rifle and marching against the Germans. It was impossible therefore to see eye to eye: for me he was a truly pathological case. All the same it was one of the saddest, most painful moments of my life (and, I dare to suggest, for him too) when, after a more than acrimonious discussion, we parted like adversaries, almost as enemies.

Great was my sorrow at the loss of the friend and for the harm done to the cause as a result of the confusion that would be created among the comrades by his defection. But in spite of everything the love and esteem which I felt for the man were unimpaired, just as the hope that once the moment of euphoria had passed and the foreseeable consequences of the war were viewed in their proper perspective, he would admit his mistake and return to the movement, the Kropotkin of old.

Kropotkin was at the same time a scientist and a social reformer. He was inspired by two passions: the desire for knowledge and the desire to act for the good of humanity, two noble passions which can be mutually useful and which one would like to see in all men, without being, for all this, one and the same thing. But Kropotkin was an eminently systematic personality and he wanted to explain everything



with one principle, and reduce everything to unity and often did so, in my opinion, at the expense of logic.

Thus he used science to support his social aspirations, because in his opinion, they were simply rigorous scientific deductions.

I have no special competence to judge Kropotkin as a scientist. I know that he had in his early youth rendered notable services to geography and geology, and I appreciate the great importance of his book on Mutual Aid, and I am convinced that with his vast culture and noble intelligence, could have made a greater contribution to the advancement of the sciences had his thoughts and activity not been absorbed in the social struggle. Nevertheless it seems to me that he lacked that something which goes to make a true man of science; the capacity to forget one's aspirations and preconceptions and observe facts with cold objectivity. He seemed to me to be what I would gladly call, a poet of science. By an original intuition, he might have succeeded in foreseeing new truths, but these truths would have needed to be verified by others with less, or no imagination, but who were better equipped with what is called the scientific spirit. Kropotkin was too passionate to be an accurate observer.

His normal procedure was to start with a hypothesis and then look for the facts that would confirm it – which may be a good method for discovering new things; but what happened, and quite unintentionally, was that he did not see the ones which invalidated his hypothesis.

He could not bring himself to admit a fact, and often not even to consider it, if he had not first managed to explain it, that is to fit it into his system.

As an example I will recount an episode in which I played a part.

When I was in the Argentinian Pampas (in the years 1885 to 1889), I happened to read something about the experiments in hypnosis by the School of Nancy, which was new to me. I was very interested in the subject but had no opportunity at the time to find out more. When I was back again in Europe, I saw Kropotkin in London, and asked him if he could give me some information on hypnosis. Kropotkin flatly denied that there was any truth in it; that it was either all a fake or a question of hallucinations. Some time later I saw him again, and the conversation turned once more onto the subject. To my great surprise I found that his opinion had completely changed; hypnotic phenomena had become a subject of interest deserving to be studied. What had happened then? Had he learned new facts or had he had convincing proofs of those he had previously denied? Not at all. He had, quite simply, read in a book, by I don't know which German



physiologist, a theory on the relationship between the two hemispheres of the brain which could serve to explain, well or badly, the phenomena of hypnosis.

In view of this mental predisposition which allowed him to accommodate things to suit himself in questions of pure science, in which there are no reasons why passion should obfuscate the intellect, one could foresee what would happen over those questions which intimately concerned his deepest wishes and his most cherished hopes.

Kropotkin adhered to the materialist philosophy that prevailed among scientists in the second half of the 19th century, the philosophy of Moleschott, Buchner, Vogt and others; and consequently his concept of the Universe was rigorously mechanistic.

According to his system, Will (a creative power whose source and nature we cannot comprehend, just as, likewise, we do not understand the nature and source of 'matter' or of any of the other 'first principles') – I was saying, Will which contributes much or little in determining the conduct of individuals – and of society, does not exist and is a mere illusion. All that has been, that is and will be, from the path of the stars to the birth and decline of a civilisation, from the perfume of a rose to the smile on a mother's lips, from an earthquake to the thoughts of a Newton, from a tyrant's cruelty to a saint's goodness, everything had to, must, and will occur as a result of an inevitable sequence of causes and effects of mechanical origin, which leaves no possibility of variety. The illusion of Will is itself a mechanical fact.

Naturally if Will has no power, if everything is necessary and cannot be otherwise, then ideas of freedom, justice and responsibility have no meaning, and have no bearing on reality.

Thus logically all we can do is to contemplate what is happening in the world, with indifference, pleasure or pain, depending on one's personal feelings, without hope and without the possibility of changing anything.

So Kropotkin, who was very critical of the fatalism of the Marxists, was, himself, the victim of mechanistic fatalism which is far more inhibiting.

But philosophy could not kill the powerful Will that was in Kropotkin. He was too strongly convinced of the truth of his system to abandon it or stand by passively while others cast doubt on it; he was too passionate, and too desirous of liberty and justice to be halted



by the difficulty of a logical contradiction, and give up the struggle. He got round the dilemma by introducing anarchism into his system and making it into a scientific truth.

He would seek confirmation for his view by maintaining that all recent discoveries in all the sciences, from astronomy right through to biology and sociology coincided in demonstrating always more clearly that anarchy is the form of social organisation which is imposed by natural laws.

One could have pointed out that whatever are the conclusions that can be drawn from contemporary science, it was a fact that if new discoveries were to destroy present scientific beliefs, he would have remained an anarchist in spite of science, just as he was an anarchist in spite of logic. But Kropotkin would not have been able to admit the possibility of a conflict between science and his social aspirations and would have always thought up a means, no matter whether it was logical or not, to reconcile his mechanistic philosophy with his anarchism.

Thus, after having said that "anarchy is a concept of the Universe based on the mechanical interpretation of phenomena which embrace the whole of nature including the life of societies" (*I confess I have never succeeded in understanding what this might mean*) Kropotkin would forget his mechanistic concept as a matter of no importance, and throw himself into the struggle with the fire, enthusiasm and confidence of one who believes in the efficacy of his Will and who hopes by his activity to obtain or contribute to the achievement of the things he wants.

In point of fact Kropotkin's anarchism and communism were much more the consequence of his sensibility than of reason. In him the heart spoke first and then reason followed to justify and reinforce the impulses of the heart.

What constituted the true essence of his character was his love of mankind, the sympathy he had for the poor and the oppressed. He truly suffered for others, and found injustice intolerable even if it operated in his favour.

At the time when I frequented him in London, he earned his living by collaborating to science magazines and other publications, and lived in relatively comfortable circumstances; but he felt a kind of remorse at being better off than most manual workers and always seemed to want to excuse himself for the small comforts he could afford. He often said, when speaking of himself and of those in similar



circumstances: "If we have been able to educate ourselves and develop our faculties; if we have access to intellectual satisfactions and live in not too bad material circumstances, it is because we have benefited, through an accident of birth, by the exploitation to which the workers are subjected; and therefore the struggle for the emancipation of the workers is a duty, a debt which we must repay."

It was for his love of justice, and as if by way of expiating the privileges that he had enjoyed, that he had given up his position, neglected the studies he so enjoyed, to devote himself to the education of the workers of St. Petersburg and the struggle against the despotism of the Tsars. Urged on by these same feelings he had subsequently joined the International and accepted anarchist ideas. Finally, among the different interpretations of anarchism he chose and made his own the communist-anarchist programme which, being based on solidarity and on love, goes beyond justice itself.

But as was obviously foreseeable, his philosophy was not without influence on the way he conceived the future and on the form the struggle for its achievement should take.

Since, according to his philosophy that which occurs must necessarily occur, so also the communist-anarchism he desired, must inevitably triumph as if by a law of Nature.

And this freed him from any doubt and removed all difficulties from his path. The bourgeois world was destined to crumble; it was already breaking up and revolutionary action only served to hasten the process.

His immense influence as a propagandist as well as stemming from his great talents, rested on the fact that he showed things to be so simple, so easy, so inevitable, that those who heard him speak or read his articles were immediately fired with enthusiasm.

Moral problems vanished because he attributed to the 'people', the working masses, great abilities and all the virtues. With reason he praised the moral influence of work, but did not sufficiently clearly see the depressing and corrupting effects of misery and subjection. And he thought that it would be sufficient to abolish the capitalists' privileges and the rulers' power for all men immediately to start loving each other as brothers and to care for the interests of others as they would for their own.

In the same way he did not see the material difficulties, or he easily dismissed them. He had accepted the idea, widely held among the anarchists at the time, that the accumulated stocks of food and manufactured goods, were so abundant that for a long time to come



it would not be necessary to worry about production; and he always declared that the immediate problem was one of consumption, that for the triumph of the revolution it was necessary to satisfy the needs of everyone immediately as well as abundantly, and that production would follow the rhythm of consumption. From this idea came that of 'taking from the storehouses' ('presa nel mucchio'), which he popularised and which is certainly the simplest way of conceiving communism and the most likely to please the masses, but which is also the most primitive, as well as truly utopian, way. And when he was made to observe that this accumulation of products could not possibly exist, because the bosses normally only allow for the production of what they can sell at a profit, and that possibly at the beginning of a revolution it would be necessary to organise a system of rationing, and press for an intensification of production rather than call upon [the people] to help themselves from a storehouse which in the event would be non-existent, Kropotkin set about studying the problem at first hand and arrived at the conclusion that in fact such abundance did not exist and that some countries were continually threatened by shortages. But he recovered [his optimism] by thinking of the great potentialities of agriculture aided by science. He took as examples the results obtained by a few cultivators and gifted agronomists over limited areas and drew the most encouraging conclusions, without thinking of the difficulties that would be put in the way by the ignorance and aversion of the peasants to what is change, and in any case to the time that would be needed to achieve general acceptance of the new forms of cultivation and of distribution.

As always, Kropotkin saw things as he would have wished them to be and as we all hope they will be one day; he considered as existing or immediately realisable that which must be won through long and bitter struggle.

At bottom Kropotkin conceived nature as a kind of Providence, thanks to which there had to be harmony in all things, including human societies.

And this has led many anarchists to repeat that *Anarchy is Natural Order*, a phrase with an exquisite Kropotkinian flavour.

If it is true that the law of Nature is Harmony, I suggest one would be entitled to ask why Nature has waited for anarchists to be born, and goes on waiting for them to triumph, in order to destroy the terrible and destructive conflicts from which mankind has always suffered.

Would one not be closer to the truth in saying that anarchy is the struggle, in human society, against the disharmonies of Nature?



I have stressed the two errors which, in my opinion, Kropotkin committed – his theory of fatalism and his excessive optimism, because I believe I have observed the harmful results they have produced on our movement.

There were comrades who took the fatalist theory – which they euphemistically referred to as determinism – seriously and as a result lost all revolutionary spirit. The revolution, they said, is not made; it will come when the time is ripe for it, and it is useless, unscientific and even ridiculous to try to provoke it. And armed with such sound reasons, they withdrew from the movement and went about their own business. But it would be wrong to believe that this was a convenient excuse to withdraw from the struggle. I have known many comrades of great courage and worth, who have exposed themselves to great dangers and who have sacrificed their freedom and even their lives in the name of anarchy while being convinced of the uselessness of their actions. They have acted out of disgust for present society, in a spirit of revenge, out of desperation, or the love of the grand gesture, but without thinking thereby of serving the cause of revolution, and consequently without selecting the target and the opportune moment, or without bothering to coordinate their action with that of others.

On the other hand, those who without troubling themselves with philosophy have wanted to work towards, and for, the revolution, have imagined the problems as much simpler than they are in reality, did not foresee the difficulties, and prepare for them ... and because of this we have found ourselves impotent even when there was perhaps a chance of effective action.

May the errors of the past serve to teach us to do better in the future.

I have said what I had to say.

I do not think my strictures on him can diminish Kropotkin, the person, who remains, in spite of everything, one of the shining lights of our movement.

If they are just, they will serve to show that no man is free from error, not even when he is gifted with the great intelligence and the generous heart of a Kropotkin.

In any case anarchists will always find in his writings a treasury of fertile ideas and in his life an example and an incentive in the struggle for all that is good.



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## THE CLASSICS

**Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution** (Freedom Press) 278 pages, £5.00. *Mutual Aid* was Kropotkin's most influential book, and mutual aid was his most influential idea, with John Hewetson's long introduction 'Mutual Aid and Social Evolution'.

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**Act For Yourself** (Freedom Press) 131 pages, £2.50. At the same time as he was writing *The Conquest of Bread* for the French anarchist press, Kropotkin wrote a similar

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